WHITE JAVELIN by NICK BODDIE WILLIAMS

25¢

Adventure

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

APRIL

A CANNON FOR MR. BIBBS
by MERLE CONSTINER

JIM KJELGAARD
CHARLES W. TYLER

APRIL 1946

ADVENTURE

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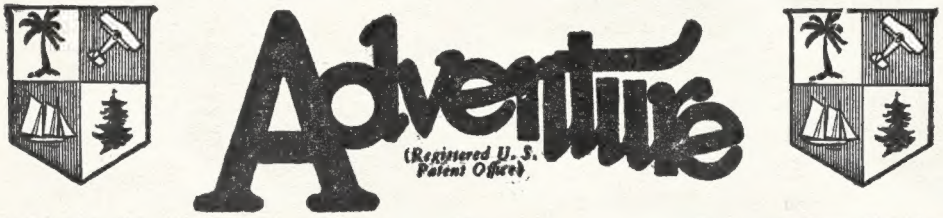

Vol. 114, No. 6 for **April, 1946** **Best of New Stories**

THE NOVELETTE

A Cannon for Mr. Bibbs..... MERLE CONSTINER 32

A canal town in Ohio in the 1830's was a tavern town and Dandridge was no exception with boozing kens flourishing along its cobbled waterfront like the green bay tree. Which was why, when Schoolmaster Ryecroft was offered the Red Buck Inn at a bargain price, he leaped at the chance to buy. Instead of shiftless pupils to birch, spelling bees and Latin verbs to con, an affluent life of ease playing mine host to the Dandridge gentry stretched before him—or so Ryecroft thought. Not till his thriving hostel turned into a pig-in-a-poke did he conclude he might better have stuck to ruler and slate and steered clear of innkeeping, but by then it was too late. All he could do was turn ghoul and resurrect the secret sealed in the coffin of the man who'd swindled him—and bet that after the exhumation business would automatically begin to boom under the Red Buck's decaying roof.

SHORT STORIES

Village of Darkness..... D. L. CHAMPION 24

To Maxon, four-time killer, fleeing from certain death sentence in the States, southern Chiapas where Mexico borders Guatemala seemed the ideal haven. There, he'd been told, man-made law was a laughing stock and pursuit would never reach him. What he'd not bothered to learn, of course, was the legal code set up by the insects there. They meted out a sterner justice than human judges ever had. For this was the dread area where the *simullium* fly held sway, the *zona onchocercosa* in which immunity from the chair or hangman's noose was only traded for a bitterer doom.

Baldy Sours and the Mighty Atom..... CHARLES W. TYLER 70

It all begun when Baldy commenced wrestlin' with this atom thing. That's what his brain is—a atom—an' all he's got to do is mingle with his brother man a few minutes an' somebody's tryin' to split it. An' that's how come he's just as safe in the town of Buzzard now as a man who's goin' to be hanged in the mornin'.

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BE OUT ON APRIL 10TH ◆◆◆

Indianapolis Bait ..... COLEMAN MEYER 78

Take a nicely functioning organization composed of eighteen midget race-cars and eighteen drivers that is clicking it off like a set of matched rear-end gears—toss in a portion of female—and what do you get? . . . Right! . . . It's just like throwing a castellated nut in the differential. Like the time, for instance, when young Joe Humphries was trying to wangle a spot on the two miles of hot brick that spell Indianapolis on May Day.

Breed of the Blue Hen ..... JIM KJELGAARD 86

Fighting cocks can die—many of them do—but there's never anything yellow in their passing. And while there's a breath of life in them they'll strive for that final blow that may bring victory out of defeat. Maybe that was the reason Al Carzot was willing to devote his life to the game. A tinge of yellow was poison to the little guy and that was the one thing that never appeared after the pit master gave the order—"Bill your birds!"

SERIALS

White Javelin (1st of 4 parts) ..... NICK BODDIE WILLIAMS 10

The flight across the Hump to Cheng-tu had begun well enough, but when a man's spent eighteen months dodging tree-tops and ground-fire he forgets about the upper air. That's what happened to Rick Hale when the transport plunged into that strange arrow of wind above the roof of the world and sent him plummeting down to Asia's high hinterland on the first lap of what was to turn into a fabulous race to get stakes down in the game of international poker-diplomacy.

Cleared for Action (conclusion) ..... R. W. DALY 97

In which young Farmery Gosselyn fights his *Warwick* against the Frenchman, *L'Espoir*, and is forced to the embarrassed conclusion that perhaps the Lords of the Admiralty knew what they were about after all when they made him captain of a thirty-two gun frigate . . . his tender age notwithstanding.

THE FACT STORY

Where Poison Rules ..... COMMANDER J. E. CAPSTICKDALE 132

Lethal lore from the land of the sumpitan where Malay, Dyak and Orang Laut are all equally proficient in the art of toxic concoction and the white man is a babe in the jungle.

VERSE

Buzz *vs.* Rattle ..... H. M. CASTLE 69

Old Pard Van Sales was hard as nails but he drove his luck too much;
He kicked awake a wicked snake that rattled at his touch!

DEPARTMENTS

The Camp-Fire ..... Where readers, writers and adventurers meet 6
Ask Adventure ..... Information you can't get elsewhere 134
Ask Adventure Experts ..... The men who furnish it 136
Lost Trails ..... Where old paths cross 143
The Trail Ahead ..... News of next month's issue 144

Cover painted for Adventure by Gail Phillips

Kenneth S. White, Editor

THE CAMP-FIRE

Where Readers, Writers and Adventurers Meet

IT'S A crowded *Camp-Fire* this month despite the fact that there's only one recruit to our Writers' Brigade on hand to be mustered in and asked to toss his chips on the blaze.

Commander Capstickdale, who contributes the brief article on native Malay poisons on page 132, has, however, crammed enough activity into his career to fill nine lives. Too succinctly summarizing his background, we feel, on appearing in these pages for the first time, the commander writes—

I was born in Kent, England. Left there in early childhood when my father, then in the British Consular Service, moved the family to Turkey. Went to sea at 18, as apprentice in the barque *Lorton* of Liverpool. Mate under sail and steam in the Atlantic and Pacific. Jumped ship at Portland, Oregon. Worked my way down the Pacific coast into Mexico, where I did some prospecting. Back at sea as trader in the Gilberts, working for the British Phosphate Co. Atoll Surveyor and pearler in the Ellice Islands and Broome, Australia. Rose to be first mate, then master of the barque *Flying Childers*, plying between South America and Australia.

Lieutenant in Royal Naval Reserve. Then navigating lieutenant and first lieutenant on board training ship in Royal Australian Navy. Rose to commander of patrol ship, then of a gunboat, minesweeping (First World War). King's Harbor Master.

After the war, coconut planter in Borneo and timber logger, owning 31 sq. miles of forest preserves. Manager of tobacco estate and rubber plantation in Borneo. Treasure hunter in Java. Entomologist in Siam and Cambodia—(a bug got into the teakwood and I was sent by Government to collect some specimens).

Lt. Col. Imperial War Staff; King's Messenger.

Administrator of the Cargados Carajos Islands in the Indian Ocean near Mauritius. Came out there from England in a 40-ton trawler—9,600 miles in 50 days. More treasure hunts.

Omitted to mention that in short intervals spent on dry land, I was irrigation surveyor in South Africa and foreman of stevedores in Australia. Also treasure-hunted Easter and Pitcairn Islands.

Now editor of a daily paper in Port Louis, Mauritius, with various other irons in the fire.

My published work has appeared in: *Travel, American Foreign Service Journal, Popular Mechanics, Strand Magazine, Pall Mall, Blue Peter, Sphere* and sundry South African and Australian papers.

My chief hobby is research into the history and records of American clipper ships and history and lore of pirates. This latter subject I have pursued through old unpublished records in Cape Town, Port Louis in Mauritius, where I now live, and various places in the Far East. I have participated in seven treasure hunts without showing much of a loss. At one time was £7,500 up.

Commander Capstickdale, apropos of Carl D. Lane's novelette, "The Guns of Cayuga," which we published last August, adds the following interesting footnote describing unexplained phenomena of Nature which he has encountered in various parts of the world and which parallel those strange cannonades mentioned by Mr. Lane as occurring occasionally in the Finger Lakes region of New York—

The newspapers and the radio have lately carried reports that the famous "Moodus noises" have returned to plague the inhabitants of the Connecticut town whose name they bear. These are dull booming sounds like the bombardment of distant heavy artillery. Scientists have thus far been unable to explain the cause of these sounds, which have been heard for no apparent reason, since Indian times. Hence the name of the town—"Place of Strange Noises."

These phantom cannon of Moodus (and those of Cayuga and Seneca) have their counterpart in the well known "Barisal guns" on the other side of the world, whose origin is equally mysterious.

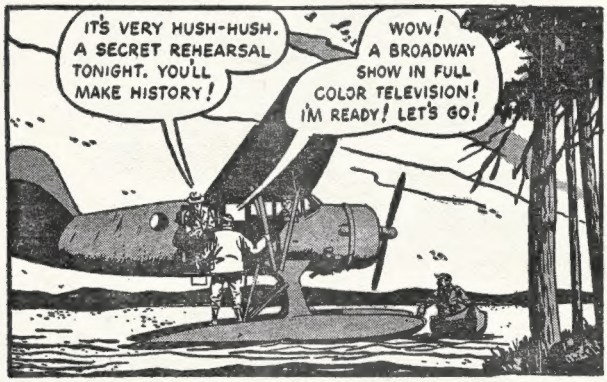
Barisal is one of the Sunderbunds, those swamps and islands of the Ganges delta. It was there that in 1871 the spirit cannon were first reliably observed by Mr. G. B. Scott, Surveyor General of Bengal, who like all later observers was completely mystified.

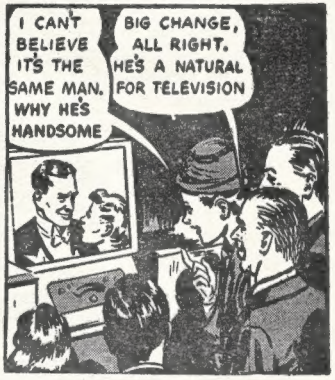
A later observer, Col. H. S. Olcott, from the island mentioned "heard the dull, muffled boom of distant cannon—sometimes a single report, sometimes a number in quick

(Continued on page 8)

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...

IF THAT BLASTED PLANE HADN'T SCARED HIM, I'D HAVE SHOT THAT MOOSE
LOOK... HE'S LANDING ON OUR LAKE. LET'S SEE WHAT'S COOKING!
BOB ALLEN, YOUNG ACTOR, RESTS FROM A LONG RUN ON BROADWAY BY HUNTING UP NORTH


IT'S VERY HUSH-HUSH. A SECRET REHEARSAL TONIGHT. YOU'LL MAKE HISTORY!
WOW! A BROADWAY SHOW IN FULL COLOR TELEVISION! I'M READY! LET'S GO!



I THINK YOU WERE MARVELOUS
JOIN US FOR A LATE SNACK, ALLEN. I'VE GOT GREAT PLANS FOR THIS SHOW... AND YOU'RE IN THEM
SEE WHAT A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE DOES FOR A MAN!

YOU ALWAYS GET REFRESHING, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTE BLADES, FOR THESE ARE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING, LOW-PRICED BLADES YOU EVER USED. AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR RAZOR PRECISELY, THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE SMART AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 FOR 10¢

(Continued from page 6)

succession—never near, always distant, but never twice from the same distance or quarter."

There was no possibility of the reports being due to "bores," or full-breasted rollers, beating on the shore, for the circumstances precluded such. Thus far no plausible theory has been advanced to account satisfactorily for these phenomena.

These ghostly guns are not peculiar to Barisal and to Moodus, Connecticut, nor even to the land for they have been heard at sea. Sometimes the reports came from the water and sometimes from the air—and they remain an enigma, constituting one of Nature's most baffling secrets.

Among the suggested solutions that have been investigated, the following may be mentioned—the crash of falling cliffs; large bamboos bursting in forest fires; submarine disturbances; impact of gales in caves; escapes of combustible gases; electric detonations and ordinary thunder claps. All of these proved untenable explanations.

It is said in India that an epidemic of these "guns" usually accompanies landslips on a large scale; erosions of vast areas due to subsidence on account of subterranean encroachments by water and definite alterations of deep channels. The sharp earth shocks, which in Moodus accompany the noises, lend plausibility to this theory. Perhaps the "guns" explain how Nature effects these changes.

The rivers of Bengal bring down alluvium. Under the pressure of Himalayan waters vast chambers of imprisoned air assume the form of highly compressed gas cylinders, which are in effect pneumatic chambers. It is said that when the sealing alluvia is unable to withstand the pressure, the containing chamber bursts like a huge cartridge when exploded. This is, of course, possible in this instance.

This may be true of the delta phenomena, but it does not explain the "guns" of the Indus, which are almost as frequently heard. Neither does it explain the "guns" in other parts of the world, which have been reported by such reliable authorities as Sturt and Hume, the Australian explorers; Col. Godwin Austen of the Indian Survey; the Rev. W. S. Smith of County Antrim; Mr. J. J. Astor, who heard them in Wyoming, while others of his party heard them in the Canadian Rockies.

During the First World War, the lighthouse keepers and others living on Tagnak Island, twenty miles from Sandakan, the capital of North Borneo, reported that a naval engagement had taken place at sea within their hearing, yet not within their sight. Large guns and small had taken part in the battle, which lasted for some two hours or more. The reports, thirty or forty in number, had been heard from every point in the compass, postulating a battle-front of something like 150 miles, which was out of the question in any possible circumstances. Thunder again was ruled out by the complete fineness of the weather.

Now all these people were familiar with naval gun fire, for only a few weeks previously, four ships of the Royal Australian Navy had held a combined target practice, lasting nearly a whole day in the vicinity of the island. Yet at the time of the occurrence there was not a warship of any description within 800 miles. The nearest was a small American squadron lying inactive at Manila.

During the present conflict, invisible naval engagements signalized by the booming of large guns have been reported off the Scandinavian coast. On investigation it appeared that nothing of the kind had actually happened. It was the "Barisal guns" again, whose shots were heard around the world.

I have heard these "guns" on seven different occasions in as many different parts of the world in the order named: Venezuela; Peru; N.W. Australia; New Guinea; the Cargados Carajos Islands; Rodriguez in the Southern Indian Ocean and Madagascar. Similar occurrences have been reported to me at first hand, in no less than eight other countries, including the heart of Scotland.

A peculiar incident marked one of these occasions. My ship had anchored in twelve fathoms in a wide bay on the N.W. coast of New Guinea. The "guns" were heard by six hundred of the ship's company, shortly after anchoring.

The reports, like those of a twelve-inch rifle, came from the middle of the jungle, though the country for a hundred miles was uninhabited, owing to swamp and its pestilential nature in general.

Later, the anchor cable began to "talk" and this ended in the cable hanging straight up and down, obviously "empty." Sounding then disclosed a depth of water of seventy fathoms, so it was a case of up stick and away to sea, at one in the morning.

The two incidents might have been related and again they may not. No explanation was forthcoming, but nothing is more certain than that the "guns" were not due to any human agency. The conditions ruled such out completely. What is the answer?

We'd be interested to hear from any other readers of *Adventure* who have heard, or heard of, similar "guns" booming in other corners of the world and if anyone thinks he has an explanation for the rumble of such non-GI ordnance we'll be glad to pass it along for comment.

ABOUT the dread disease, and the area where it flourishes, which forms the background of his story "Village of Darkness" on page 24, D. L. Champion writes—

In was in 1940 that I first heard of the

(Continued on page 138)

INTRIGUE IN MEXICO CITY!

KILLERS IN THE SHADOWS!

ROMANCE TO THE RHUMBA!

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Produced by PHIL L. RYAN · Directed by EDWARD H. GRIFFITH

WHITE

By
NICK BODDIE
WILLIAMS

HE CAME walking timidly from the forest toward the sandbagged anti-aircraft emplacement. He looked like a wild man, and certainly he was a little crazy at first. He laughed at anything—or nothing. And then he'd talk. It was the talking that seemed craziest—long, rolling, sonorous lines that sounded as if he were slinging into them everything he'd ever read and ever thought. And there was something about the photograph of a girl. None of it made much sense. Just noise—just babble. Or that, at least, was how it seemed at first.

The anti-aircraft sergeant telephoned back to the base at Ambrugarh. They sent a jeep for him, and thirty minutes later he was sitting in the C. O.'s *basha*, grinning through that fantastic growth of beard. Colonel Marcus Rowan, was new at Ambrugarh. A nice-enough guy, but new, fresh from the States, and this man with the haunted, frightened face, this man in rags who laughed and talked and who'd walked out of the Burma jungle meant nothing to him. It wasn't until Major Herman Raab came over from the base hospital that the picture was straightened out. Raab took one look and gasped.

"My God," he said. "It's Rick Hale!"

It was incredible, for they had written Hale off. Rick Hale was dead. His fighter-bomber group had long since gone from Ambrugarh. Six months before, in fact. Yet here was Colonel Richard Hale, come back.

There he found the wreckage of the plane. It had not burned but the fuselage was split apart, apparently broken while still in midair by that tremendous shaft of wind.

JAVELIN

ILLUSTRATED BY HAMILTON GREENE

When he came walking from the forest toward the anti-aircraft emplacement he looked like a wild man and he laughed at anything—or nothing.

In those last days of July, 1945, Burma was a forgotten front. They were pasting hell out of Tokyo by then—which was something Rick Hale could not quite grasp. He'd known, of course, back in January when he disappeared, that the war was moving on from Burma. He'd been scheduled to lead his group of P-51's to bases near Cheng-tu in China's Szechuen province, to provide fighter cover for the B-29's that were based there then. And crazy as the Burma jungle sometimes drove the boys, they weren't cockeyed enough to fly all those P-51's across the Hump. They'd plotted a dogleg south and east, then north and west, the safest way to take that many planes into Szechuen. But Rick was going ahead to case the field, making the jump deadheading over the Hump on a C-47 carrier. He was damned glad to go, glad to be moving on at last.

Of course there was nothing wrong with Ambrugarh that another climate and a few hundred more planes—and a little less brass in some places—couldn't have improved. That was true of all those early bases in Burma. Major Raab used to listen to Rick Hale while they split a couple of cold beers from the hospital's medical refrigeration plant. Rick had thought it out pretty straight, what was wrong in Burma, and while he wasn't actually bitter about it, he was harsh.

He'd lie there under a sun lamp, picking up a tan to fight the prickly heat, swilling that nice, cold beer that in the usual Army order of things would not have been nice and cold—the hospital refrigerator was Rick's idea—and he would give.

While he talked his mouth would curl in that hard, contemptuous line and the sharp blue of his eyes would shade toward iron gray. He was a slender man, about twenty-nine, built tough and well knit. He leaned toward the spit-and-polish side, not because he was a stuffed shirt, which he certainly was not, but because it paid off. It took a lot of discipline to move the wheels in all that sickening heat, and Rick was out to make his mark in the books they kept in Washington because he was Regular Army. Not West Point, but the last class out of Kelly Field that they took in without the tag Reserve. So he could see brass, and hate brass, judiciously, because he knew his life was going to be wrapped up with it.

"But," he said, "if ever I get out of Ambrugarh—"

That was the day before he took off in the C-47.

THE FLIGHT across the Hump to Cheng-tu began well enough. When they were up to twenty thousand feet they started boring through, and Rick went forward to the pilot's compartment. He hadn't been aboard one of these heavy jobs since he was on bi-motors at Barksdale Field in Louisiana, before Pearl Harbor. They'd changed a lot since then, and it was interesting to a precisionist like Hale to watch an old airliner man—Captain Tom Wiggins—juggle that boxcar on a tricky run.

There was the usual odds-and-ends assortment aboard. A pair of ground crew noncoms and a Major Simms, an expert on artillery detailed to Wedemeyer's staff. Also a Chungking diplomatic functionary, Wong Teh-fu, who was hitch-hiking home. Then Rick and Wiggins and the co-pilot, a kid named Soritz. Passing ten thousand feet they'd all clapped on their oxygen. They lounged around, looking for all the world like overgrown koala bears, but maybe sillier. It was pretty boresome stuff. Just peaks poking their noses up—dozens of them, mile after mile of them. That's Central

Asia's idea of geography—plenty of ice, plenty of rock—awesome, perhaps, but boresome from a plane. So Rick plugged in on the inter-com.

"I'll take the Tactical Air Force," he said to Wiggins, making conversation.

Wiggins said, "Yep." He didn't give a rap which Air Force Rick Hale took. Rick thought he might, however, get a rise out of the kid, Soritz, about the ATC.

He used the old gag, the one that flying the Hump had made ridiculous. "Yes, sir," he went on, "I'm not allergic to combat."

Soritz got mad. He didn't answer but Rick saw that he was mad. The kid's ears reddened suddenly. "The Tactical," he snapped. "The boys in fancypants."

Hale grinned. "We may not live long, but we don't yawn ourselves to death."

Wiggins was staring straight ahead of him and there was something bleak about his brown, tough face. "If I were you," he said, "I wouldn't yawn just now. Suppose *that* blew into your mouth."

It was a cloud. The thing about it was its length. It stretched thinly from right to left, northwest, looking no thicker than a man's arm, but there seemed to be no end to it. Rick made a guess—a fogbank caught in a tremendous shaft of wind and flung, the way a Naga tribesman hurls a javelin. It looked, in fact, exactly like a thin, white javelin.

"Rick said, "That wasn't in my textbooks."

"Nope."

"What do you call it?"

Wiggins shrugged. "They keep inventing weather in these hills."

The way he said it gave Rick Hale a jolt. The "hills"—nice seventeen-thousand footers mantled permanently in ice—looked all at once a lot less like the kind of scenery a man enjoys. They looked like teeth, tartared around the base, but sharp enough. Ragged enough to bite the guts out of a transport plane.

"Where the hell are we, Wiggins?"

"Corner of Tibet."

"You turning back?"

"Yes, pal, I'm turning back."

"Couldn't go over it?"

"How would I know?" asked Wiggins placidly. "I only see the part that's pushing fog."

That was something that Rick Hale hadn't thought of yet. A wind was visible only by what it bore. He had known that, of course, but when you've spent eighteen months dodging tree-tops and ground-fire, you forget about the upper air. Wiggins was regular across the Hump. He didn't trust anything about it. He was turning back.

"I'll still," Rick said, "take the Tactical."

"Yes, pal," said Wiggins. "That, I'll bet!"

Soritz was grinning as Rick started back into the body of the plane. Wiggins was banking steeply to go west again. The noncoms didn't give a hoot. Simms kept on sleeping through it all. Only the Chinese functionary, Wong, seemed anxious over it. He tuned himself into the inter-com, aiming his earnest, deer-like eyes at Rick.

A slender, well-knit guy who leaned toward the spit-and-polish side — not because he was a stuffed shirt but because it paid off.

"Are we returning?"

"The pilot doesn't like the looks of what he's got to fly through," Rick explained.

Wong sat a moment silently. His eyes seemed pained. "Am I to understand that that is final?"

"Oh, yes, it's final," Rick said. "He's the judge."

"That is indeed regrettable."

It irritated Rick. Not because of any special emphasis, to the words, for Wong's voice was as unexcited as his face, but for some implication of reproach that Rick could not quite get. Still, you didn't snap at functionaries from Chungking. You were polite.

"Can't be helped, sir. It's a bad run, and it's better to be late than never to get there at all."

"I should say that depends. Not to get there—" Suddenly the Chinese scowled. "Not to get there relieves one of responsibilities. But late—too late, perhaps—"

He was doing very well with his epigram. If it indeed was going to be an epigram. The amazing thing was that expression on his face, one moment resignation, then—

Then terror. Sheer animal terror. The bulging of his eyes and then a scream in Chinese

on the inter-com, and Wiggins' tense, hoarse cry, "Strap in! Strap in!"

The jerk of it was sickening. Not quite like falling, Rick Hale felt. He'd lost control of planes and felt them fall with him, but this one was thrown. As quickly as a javelin leaves the hand, this one stopped going forward and went sideways, hurled. It did something unnatural to your stomach, something violent. And you were sick instants before your brain could comprehend.

The inter-com: "Watch it, there, Soritz! Leave her free. My job this time—"

Simms wasn't sleeping now. His head had slapped against a vertical aluminum rib which had sheared raggedly into the flesh. Now blood was running down into his eyes, making his face a shocking, ugly thing, the more because his eyes were glazed. The blood went down across one eye and toward his open mouth. He didn't seem to know. That much Rick saw as he was struggling to keep from ramming into the wall.

It was the strange part of it in those first few seconds, that you were not so much concerned with what was going to happen eventually. You fought to save yourself from falling those few feet onto the cabin floor. You ducked a whirling box of luggage and then grabbed—grabbed desperately—to brace against a minor injury, yet through those seconds you were plunging down toward death. You didn't comprehend that fact at first, until you heard Tom Wiggins' voice: "Check on those chutes. And if you get a chance to use them—"

Rick Hale, reeling, seized something that was soft, that squirmed out of his fingers frantically. It was the outflung arm of Wong, the Chinese, scrabbling along the cabin's wall. He saw that face, its terror-stricken grimacing, as blackness swept his senses.

Hell of a time, he thought, to get knocked out. And that was all.

AFTERWARD, Rick Hale realized that Wiggins must have fought the spinning plane for some time longer. He would have enjoyed seeing that—Wiggins' enormous hands wrestling with the controls, knowing that he was achieving nothing and yet struggling to the very end of it. There would be something epochal about it that transcended fear. Of course there must have been fear. Wiggins knew what he was up against. And for him to persist, fight on, ignore futility in the face of certain failure just for the thrill of competence—seeing Wiggins do all that would have been something to watch, Rick felt.

He was hazy about what had happened, at least when it had happened. He remembered dimly the terrific rending of the transport plane's metal body, and the feeling that he was being spilled in space. For some seconds a great rush of wind enveloped him. And then, out of the semi-oblivion of his senses, it came to him that he was falling clear. He yanked at the ring of his parachute, though quite mechanically, a reflex of his training that required no thought. For a long time after that he was floating. It was pleasant, completely pleasant to be doing that. It was like those moments after ether, a feeling of utter irresponsibility. Then he struck the earth sharply and lay still.

A sensation of oppressive heat eventually awakened him. He was bathed in sweat. His first thought was that he was trapped beside the burning plane, but when he forced his eyes to open he lay alone upon a snowbank with the sun blazing down into his eyes. He remembered the phenomenon of that altitude, that you could drop of sunstroke in a temperature of sixty below. It was his flying suit, of course, protecting him against the snow while he baked in the sun. And yet he could not move—the slow, delightful thought that he still lived was too exquisite to be given up so hastily. When, finally, he shoved himself erect, the shock of it was momentarily numbing.

As a boy, he'd had a nightmare that consisted of a sepulchral voice, coming from nowhere, commanding him to pick up individually the grains of sand upon a beach. That had been horrible. But it was mild, Rick felt, to the emotion of helplessness he knew as he stared through the glare of that morning's sun, seeing those white-tipped peaks marching away from him, innumerably. To cross them, to wind between them back toward Burma—and where was Burma?—seemed like picking up that nightmarish infinitude of sand.

He had landed on a protected shelf of rock, not too high above the valley floor. The thing to do, he decided, was to reach the floor of the valley. Not that that would get him anywhere. It was like Wiggins clinging to the transport's wheel. It was just the first thing, and the only thing that could be done.

That was the work of the morning. At the base of the peak was a tiny stream, and this he followed, trailing it through a narrow gorge until it opened out again. And there he found the wreckage of the plane.

It had not burned, but he saw that the fuselage was split apart, actually twisted apart, apparently from the stress on its metal while still in midair. That, Rick Hale knew, must have been when he was thrown clear. Wiggins must have kept the plane aloft until that tremendous shaft of wind had literally broken it, then cut the switch and dumped his gas when he saw he had no chance to escape. His body lay against the shattered instrument panel, his chute still packed. And crumpled underneath him was the body of the kid, Soritz. The kid

He remembered being spilled in space and then came the realization that he was falling clear.

whom Rick had prodded about the ATC. Allergic to combat—it made Rick Hale feel sick.

Rick tried to calculate what the course had been. Not toward Cheng-tu, he knew. Northwest, probably. That might put the wreck roughly north of Ambrugarh. Or—

"Asia." He shrugged. It was his only certainty.

The two noncoms and Major Simms were crushed inside the forward half of the fuselage, their bodies having that strange, dense, packed appearance that bodies in a shattered transport have. A look of being jammed—inevitable when something moving at terrific speed stops instantly.

There was no trace of Wong, neither in the wreckage itself nor on the floor of the valley. In Rick's last lucid moment before he'd conked his head, he'd grabbed at Wong's outflung arm, and that, he reasoned, meant that Wong might still have been close to him when the transport broke apart. In that case Wong, too, quite probably, was thrown clear. But being a civilian, a terrified civilian without the training that builds reflexes, he'd had, as Rick figured it, exactly "a Chinaman's chance." He wondered if in those moments of plunging earthward Wong had finished that epigram of his, or recovered that smile of resignation. *Not to get there relieves one of responsibilities.* Then, O. K., Wong—regards to your ancestors.

Rick didn't mean that too flippantly. But the fact that he'd thought of it at all brought him a new realization. He'd reached that state of emotional tension in which nothing that normally mattered, mattered now. He was obsessed with a single idea—getting out, walking away from it. And it was going to be a long, long walk!

CHAPTER II

LINCOLN—AND WASHINGTON—AND MOTHER GOOSE

RICK HALE turned, trying to orient himself. It was then he saw the small rectangle of paper in the wreckage of a plane. That his eye should stop on it, at the moment—among the bodies of these men—was final proof to him of the disorder of his senses. He should have been looking at peaks and valleys and the sun. And here was was looking at the photograph of a girl.

He shook his head. Punchy, he thought, but he stooped and picked it up.

She was a child, or not much past childhood. It wasn't much of a photograph, an enlargement from some kind of group shot and consequently out of focus. The camera's lens, perhaps, had not been aimed at her. But even so there was an odd loveliness about the features. Not prettiness. The face was too deeply oval and the eyes too large, as in a Byzantine icon. And no smile. Funny how a man sometimes confused a smile with good looks. Invitation, or something like that.

Well, this girl didn't have it, that kind of good looks. There was no invitation. She seemed as aloof as the icy peaks above him. As unattainable as the clouds that were their hair.

"Ah, nuts," he said, meaning just that. This

was no time for writing sonnets for a lost lady. Even a Byzantine exquisite with the face of an icon and a strangely detached, unattainable—

He heard it just then—he was quite sure he heard it—a low-pitched grunt. He hesitated a moment with the photograph in his hand, his thumb and fingers working nervously at it, and then he jerked toward the sound and something snapped.

Carefully, Rick Hale sat down and tried to extricate his foot. He knew that the bone of his leg was broken, caught in the twisted metal of the wreck. And he knew that something behind him, which he'd heard make that low-pitched grunt, was watching him. But first, before he dared to look, he had to free the foot. It was not bearable even to think of seeing it before the foot was free. He'd seen trapped animals. He knew now why a snared fox gnaws its leg in two. He recognized the meaning of the sweat that seeped into his eyes. He was afraid, desperately afraid. But first, the foot! And he had to do it all so very carefully. There must be some way—

And suddenly there they were!

They came out slowly, six dumpy-looking little men swathed heavily in padded cotton. Six of them, moving very cautiously. Not friendly—not unfriendly. Deadpan.

Rick Hale was having trouble with his breath. It was like playing stud poker when you've got a deuce in the hole. You only hope that what you've got showing looks good enough. So you try to look optimistic. You're not trying to scare the other guy because that would be overdoing it. But you're trying to show him that you think you know what he's got, and that you've got that beat. And all you've really got is that deuce. That was it, that deuce—that shattered leg. That leg that wouldn't come loose. And six dumpy, deadpan, brownish men with gimlets for eyes.

They stood there quietly and looked at him, the way that people at a circus look at freaks.

Rick made a slow salute, an idiotically formal motion of his hand. And still they just gaped and looked. It was infuriating.

I'm an officer of the United States Army, Rick Hale thought, *and I'm supposed to command. These guys are lugs. I'm supposed to command! O. K. Here I go!*

"Boys," he said. "Boys." Then he beckoned to them. Inviting them closer was a gambler's touch. They weren't expecting that and it threw them off guard. And by calling them "boys" he built up his own confidence. But they did not move.

"Boys," he said earnestly, then he pointed south and said, "Ambrugarh!"

They fidgeted. He'd flicked something within their consciousness. If it was the wrong thing, Rick knew, his hand was done and his chips were in. But he had to risk that. He had to win these six dumpy men before the thought occurred to them too vigorously of going to work with their ugly little swords.

"Ambrugarh," he insisted, and jabbed his thumb over his shoulder toward the small American flag sewn on his back. "American—American—Ambrugarh." He turned his palms up, and made a motion as if lifting. "Burma," he said. "Burma—take me—lift, boy! Lift, boy!"

They shuffled nervously. One of them grinned. His teeth were like the peaks around them, tartared yet sharp. But grinning was no sign of friendliness. A hungry jackal skins its teeth. Six brownish men, their minds still undecided.

"Go now," said Rick Hale. "Now we go."

One of them spoke. It was a purr—a spitting, fuzzy purr delivered in a monotone. Sometimes it sounded faintly like the natives' speech at Ambrugarh. But Rick Hale knew no word of it. What mattered was that it was oratorical. Only a cultured man makes speeches when he means to kill. This man, spitting that fuzzy string of words in oratorical cadence, meant something else. It was an argument, a declamation of a set of facts.

At last the speaker stopped. His mouth hung loosely open for a moment, then he grinned. And all of them stood listening. Rick knew he had to give them something then. He searched his mind. There must be words for them. There had to be sounds, at least.

"Fourscore," he tried, "and seven years ago—"

They listened very carefully and Rick Hale pulled out all the stops. If they wanted oratory, that was what they'd get.

"—our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition—"

All of it, every flaming word of it, with all the flourish to it that Rick Hale could give. When he was done, they fidgeted. They grunted and then nodded sluggishly. It was as if their hands were pattering applause. He knew he had them then. He'd sold them.

"That Lincoln," Rick sighed, and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. "That Abraham—"

They seemed, from that moment, to understand completely what must be done. They freed his leg, set it with fingers that were clumsy but not cruel, then fashioned splints for it. They made a litter from small conifers and loaded him on it. Rick lay there, staring up into the sky, his thumb and fingers working at the slickness of the photograph until at last he lifted it.

"Well, kid," he said, seeing that deeply oval, somehow mystic face, "pull hard for me. It's touch and go—dynamite with fuse attached. Just us and them."

The litter rose. Without a word, sluggish, deadpan, the Tibetans started south.

RICK HALE had known that it was going to be a long, long walk. Even so, he'd figured it the way an airman figures distances, from point to point. But that was not the way you walked out of Tibet. You walked down valleys, down the interminable watercourses that were plunging from the heart of Asia, the world's roof, toward the plains of India and Burma and the sea. You tried, at least, to do that. But it was not always possible. For sometimes those plunging streams bit deep into the rock and cut themselves fantastic gorges, slits in the earth's crust where no man could walk. So then you hunted for a pass.

There was always a pass. The trick—and it was quite a trick—was finding it. And Rick Hale realized that he could never have found all of them. Even without his leg shattered, he never could have found them all. Only a Tibetan could possibly do that. Only a man born with a sense of hills, born with a feeling for the way the land would lie, could guess—it was impossible to know so many gorges and so many peaks—how earth would rise, distorted, glacier-gouged, across the craziness of jumbled ranges that was Tibet.

"Well, kid," Rick Hale would repeat, his fingers busy with that photograph, "pull hard!"

He'd say it reverently, as if the girl whose

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face was in the photograph were walking with him—tangibly, intimately.

"Well, kid—"

It didn't matter that he did not know her name nor anything about her, any more than men in anguish know a nurse. But she personified sympathy and pity and gave him such strength as a nurse gives any suffering man.

Sometimes, Rick Hale grew desperate. Mornings, when he'd awake, he'd lie there on his litter picking out the peak they'd reach by night. And then they would begin that ant-like threading through the obstacles of water and serrated range and ice. And then the sun would climb straight overhead, and pass over them and race toward the peaks off to their right. Finally with chilling speed, the night would rush toward them from the east, its ugly darkness grasping for the knobbish peaks by which it climbed toward them, until by dusk, as his six Tibetans were making camp, Rick would realize that they had not achieved the peak he'd picked. And not the half-mark to it. Distance—infinity. He'd bite his lips. He must, he knew, bite them or scream. The sand, the grains of sand upon the beach!

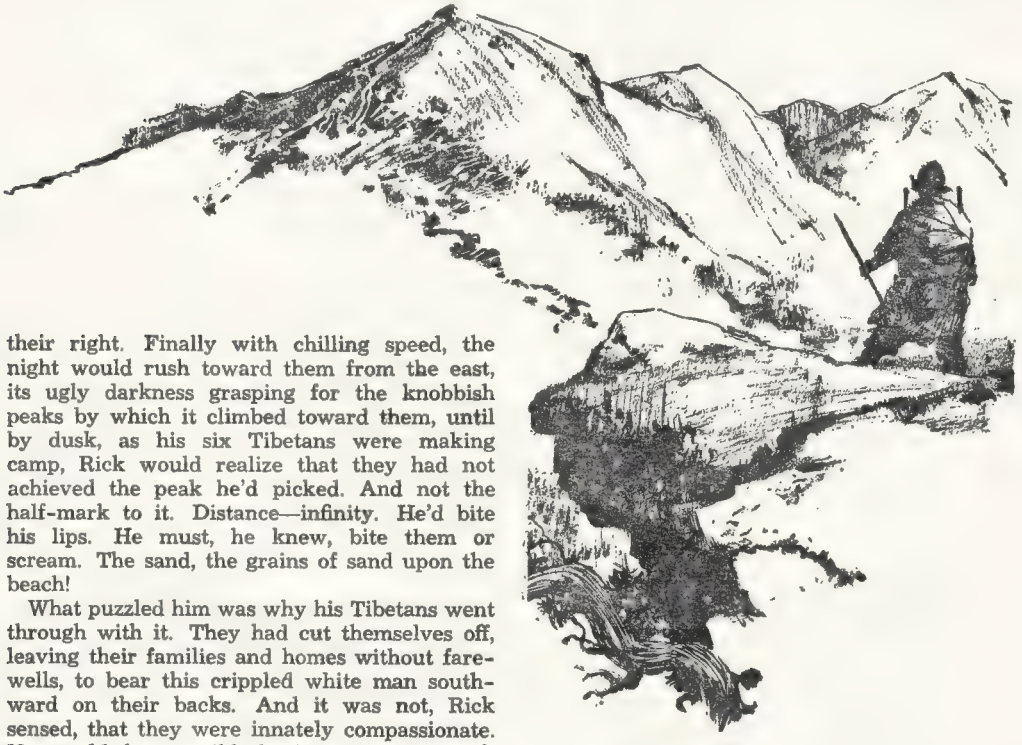
What puzzled him was why his Tibetans went through with it. They had cut themselves off, leaving their families and homes without farewells, to bear this crippled white man southward on their backs. And it was not, Rick sensed, that they were innately compassionate. Nor could they possibly begin so great a march with any hope that he could pay them adequately.

What was it, then? The possibilities were frightening. And fear went with Rick Hale through all those nights and all those days of marching to the south. The same cold paralyzing fear that he had felt when he sat with his foot trapped in the wreckage of the transport plane. The animal within the snare. Helpless, utterly helpless on that litter, borne southward by six deadpan, plodding little men. Fear that at any instant they might turn on him. Fear that they might desert. And worst of all, the pyramiding fear that came from never understanding what it was they'd heard in that crazy speech of his which now seemed to be compelling them to take him toward the south.

The answer to it came upon him suddenly. They'd struggled all one morning down the left bank of a tiny stream, and now they found themselves against a towering granite shoulder where the stream curved. There they stopped. They jabbered in that purring tongue of theirs a while, pointing at him continuously, then peering anxiously across the stream. At last Rick raised himself upon the litter.

"Go, boys," he said, pointing across.

That started them again at their nervous fidgeting. At first Rick thought it was the swiftness of the stream they feared. But gradually he realized that it was more than that. Their



eyes were not upon the rushing of the water, but upon the opposite bank. And beyond.

"Burma," Rick Hale insisted, jabbing with his hand. And then, feeling that growing husk of fear, he knew that he must speak to them again. He must exhort them to go on.

Doing it that first time had drained Rick emotionally. And now it had to be done again. He tried, making it sonorous. He gave them Washington's Farewell and cried while he was saying it. The words alone, spoken in dread, spoken out of his urgency, became a bridge between the worlds in which they lived. It was not what he said but how he said it!

When he was done they picked him up and waded stolidly into the stream. The water curled up to their armpits as they bore him through. They reached the opposite bank, then climbed toward the range which girt the stream. And once again, slowly, with agonizing carefulness, they put him down. They just stood there and stared—dumbly—waiting like cattle driven to a slaughter pen. Waiting stolidly and knowing what they waited for.

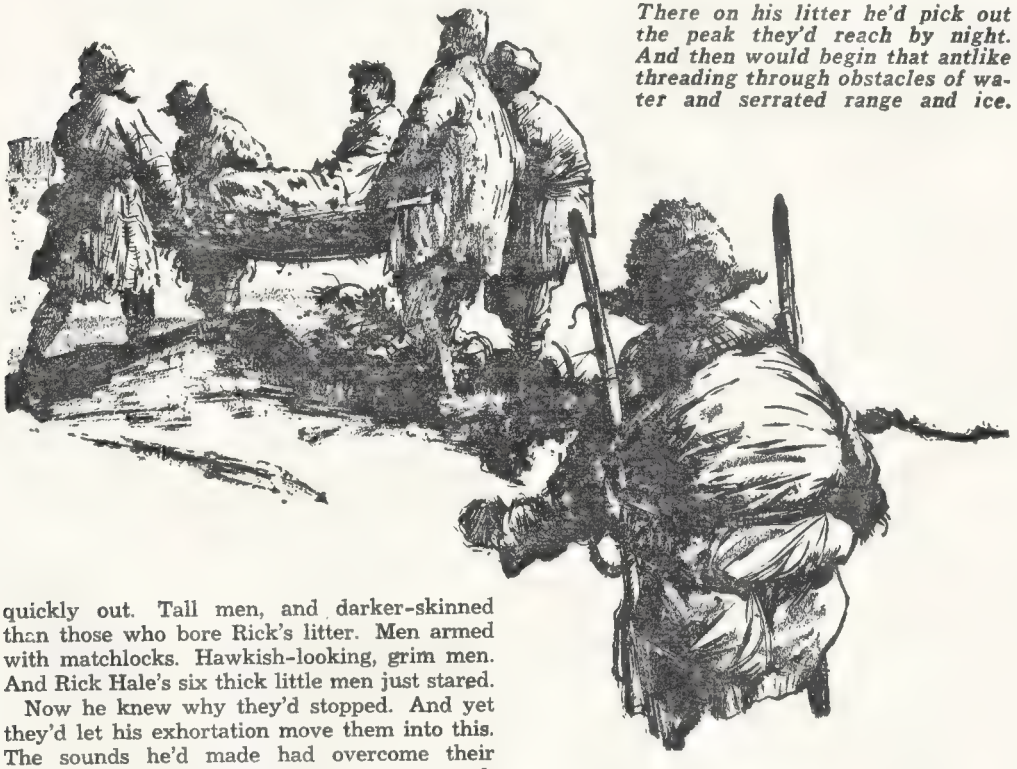
Suddenly a shadow that had been there through that interval of stolid waiting moved. That was the first sign of it. And then the rocks before them seemed to shimmer all at once with life. A swarm of men came gliding quickly out. Tall men, and darker-skinned than those who bore Rick's litter. Men armed with matchlocks. Hawkish-looking, grim men. And Rick Hale's six thick little men just stared.

Now he knew why they'd stopped. And yet they'd let his exhortation move them into this. The sounds he'd made had overcome their fear of this. It gave Rick Hale not so much confidence as desperation to try once again. Twice it had worked—

He talked. He fought to keep the words rolling out of his memory, and when it faltered, Rick Hale improvised. He sat erect upon his litter, speaking endlessly, his eyes upon those hawkish, dark-skinned men, seeing them listen to the sounds he made. He was no longer sure what he was saying—Lincoln and Washington, fragments from Shakespeare, lines from Mother Goose. The Twenty-third Psalm. All sonorous and all emotional. And while he talked, they stood.

He raised his arm as if in benediction. Then he stopped. And silence grew. The purling of the stream below them finally was audible. Rick Hale could feel the crumbling of the force of hatred which had halted them. A movement first—one of the hawkish men fading behind a rock. And then another, all so silently. No word except the ones he'd given them. No gesture now except that silent, passive fading of the hawkish men. Until, as he sat with his arm still raised in benediction in the air, the last of them was gone.

Silence. Only the purling of the stream. Only the thickness of his breath. Only the photograph between his fingers now. And then his Tibetans picked up the litter and plodded on.



There on his litter he'd pick out the peak they'd reach by night. And then would begin that antlike threading through obstacles of water and serrated range and ice.

So that was it. They must have thought that he was a messiah. And certainly he looked like one when he came to that anti-aircraft post near Ambrugarh. He was walking again by then, and he had that beard, six months of it matted upon his chest. The skin above his jutting ribs was burned to ebony. His eyes were red. He had that photograph clutched tight within one hand—and nothing else. A shred of clothes upon the gauntness of his body, but clothes no longer recognizable as such. A messiah coming timidly, half-crazily out of the Burma forest.

CHAPTER III

BRASS HATS AND LEAD BULLETS

THEY stumbled quite by chance into the anti-aircraft post, just north of Ambrugarh. Rick stood beside a gun snout with that matted beard upon his naked chest, a dozen gaping GI's ringing him, and made a speech to his six Tibetans.

It was not a long speech. He cried some, and then he laughed some. He raised his arm and murmured in a deep, soft voice, in prayer. It was, really, a prayer. He prayed for them.

"Go now," he said, and pointed north.

They stood, restive, going once more through that peculiar fidgeting. But all they wanted was a little more, a last oration, and that, Rick knew, was not much for six men who'd marched so far—marched for six months. He made another speech. It was a jumble of the things that he'd been muttering through all those months while he was jostling on the litter that they'd made for him, phrases they knew, familiar things to them. It was, the GI's said, the damnedest thing. No sense at all, and yet exciting, crazily exciting. The Gettysburg Address again, and Mother Goose again, and Washington. And Rick's six Tibetans stood there like images of wood, and when at last he finished each one nodded, very courteously. Six dumpy little men. And then, quickly, they turned and padded off toward the north. Through the jungle toward the ice and peaks and gorges of Tibet. Not ever, any of them, looking back.

The anti-aircraft sergeant scratched his balding head. He said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

"How far," Rick asked, "is it to Ambrugarh?"

"Ten miles. We'll phone a jeep."

"That would be nice," Rick said. He sat down suddenly, there beside the gun, and then he started laughing. But not in merriment. It was a jag. He laughed until the tears trickled into his beard. "Sergeant," he said at last, "that would be very nice. Sergeant, I'm going to be delirious. Just turn your head, please. Or is that beer? Can that, really, be beer?"

"Yes, sir, that's beer."

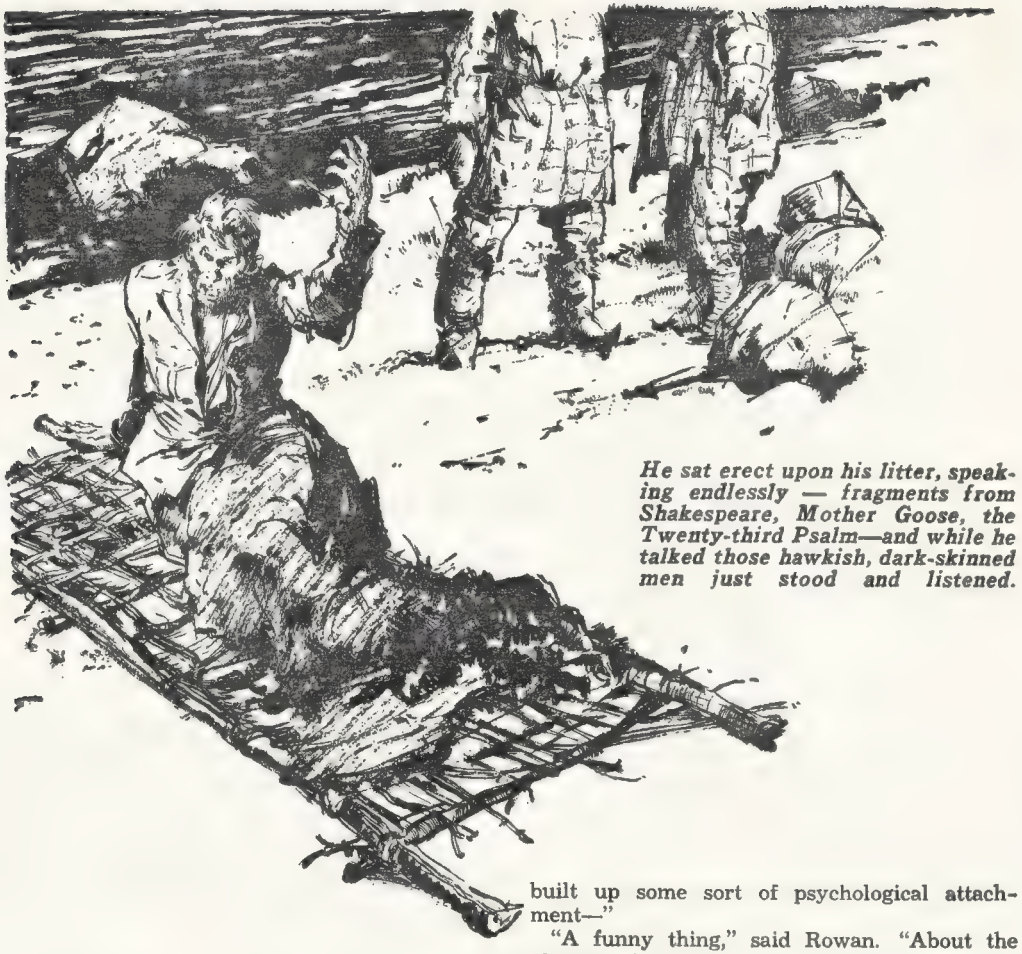
"Give it to me. And phone that jeep. And when it gets here, Sergeant, pour me in."

And then Rick Hale cracked up. He wasn't sick—his leg had mended perfectly—but six months was too long a time for playing stud. He simply had used up his nerve. It got him to the anti-aircraft post and lasted long enough for him to make that final speech to his six Tibetans, then it was gone. He sat there laughing to himself, or sometimes looking rigidly morose, his fingers clinging to that photograph, caressing it. And sometimes, after they'd hauled him into Ambrugarh, as he sat there in Rowan's *basha*, he would lift his red eyes toward the sky and say, whispering it, "Well, kid! Well, kid—"

That was the way he was when Major Herman Raab, summoned from the base hospital, first saw him.

"My God," Raab cried. "It's Rick Hale!"

Rick's tired eyes blinked. He stared at Raab.



He sat erect upon his litter, speaking endlessly — fragments from Shakespeare, Mother Goose, the Twenty-third Psalm—and while he talked those hawkish, dark-skinned men just stood and listened.

And then, slowly, that hard, contemptuous line was curling at his lips. "How did you know that, Raab?" he said. "I wasn't sure myself."

"Rick, damn you—"

"Raab, I want to sleep. And in a bed."

"Yes, pal," Raab said, gently, "a bed. Here, Rowan, help me get him up. He's my charge now."

Raab took him to the base hospital and gave him a sedative to knock him out. When, finally, he snapped out of it he wanted to talk. To hear talk. He was so sick of the sound of his own voice. It didn't matter so much what they said—the death of Roosevelt, the folding up of Germany, the walloping that Tokyo was getting—these they told him while he stared at them. Or stared dull-eyed toward that picture of the girl.

"He hasn't any idea who she is," Raab said to Rowan, "but you'd think that she's the love of his life. I suppose, because it's the only white face that he's seen in all those months, he's built up some sort of psychological attachment—"

"A funny thing," said Rowan. "About the photograph, I mean. I filed a full report on where I guessed he'd been, including that stuff he told us—you know, the Gettysburg Address—and all—and then about the picture he found in the wreck. Not every day a long-lost colonel walks in after six months, so I thought the details would hop up my report. And hell, the thing's got Washington upset."

Raab looked at him. "What do you mean, upset?"

"They've ordered me to send him there at once. Next ATC bound west."

"Impossible," Raab snorted. "A man walks in after six months of floundering through that stuff. He's in the shape they always are. And some fathead in Washington—"

"This order came," said Rowan, apologetically, "from the top. I've got no discretion."

"Well, I'm in Medical—I've always got discretion. No orders on God's earth can get Rick Hale away from here without the proper rest."

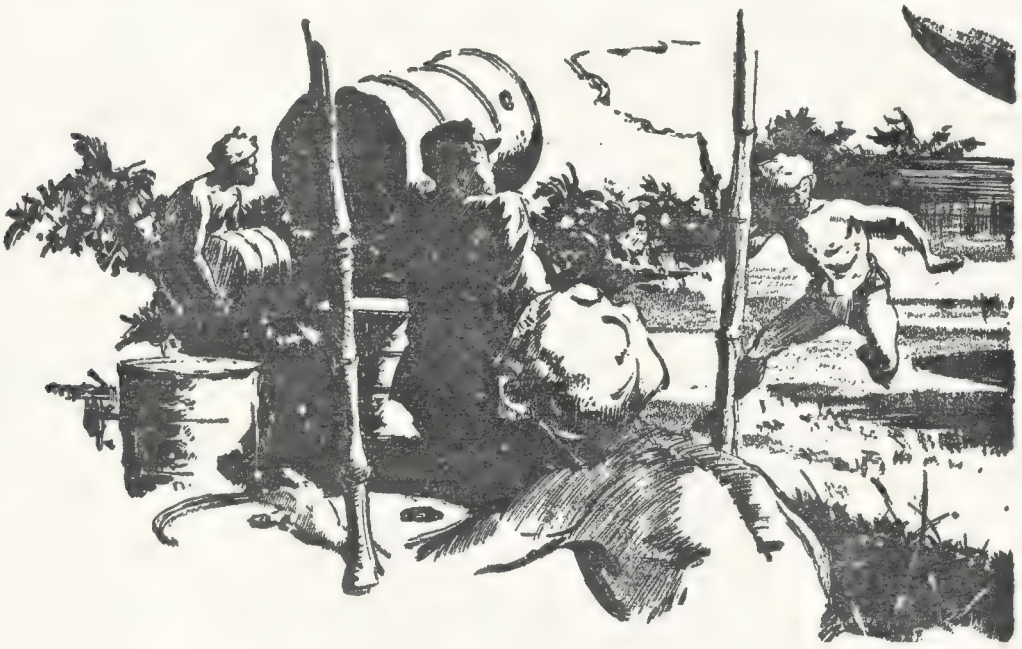
Rowan saw it was serious. "I'm sorry, Major, but he's got to go."

"Has he? Try getting him."

"I'll get him," Rowan said, "if I have to clap you in the calaboose to do it. I know the way you doctors feel about these things. You still think you're civilians. But Washington—"

Raab blew his top. "Sure, Washington! Some bull-necked former roofing manufacturer thinks he's pushing traveling salesmen around. Rick was my commanding officer before you came. Rick was my friend and I—what the hell kind of war is this, anyway? What the hell kind of

THEY reached the field and across the landing strip the transport plane was revving up. Rowan was coming rapidly toward them then, working his way between the coolies rolling iron barrels of fuel toward a dump. A pile of barrels grew while they watched. Somehow the sight of that—those skinny, turbaned men, rolling those barrels in the dust in front of them—gave Rick a queer,



theater is this now? We'd better get on into China, Colonel, as fast as we can. Out there, they shield us some from brass. Rick hated brass. And if brass kills Rick Hale—"

"Major, you'd better have a drink. It'll cool your bowels."

Raab had to take it. And Rick didn't seem to care. He was so utterly exhausted anyway that flying in a plane or lying in a dinky base hospital made no difference to him. He got up that morning, shaky but looking better—if only by the margin of a shave—and started for the landing strip. Raab went with him.

"You know I'm sorry, Rick."

"Look, Raab," Rick said, "stop beating your chest about it. I'm doing all right now—everything's all right now. As a matter of fact, I'm tickled to be getting out of this. In four days, Washington. Can you top that?"

"That's not the point. You're in such rotten shape—"

"O.K., O.K. I'm doddering toward my grave. You've done your best. So let it slide."

tight feeling in his throat. The grains of sand again. The endless, hopeless drudgery of it. Hundreds of little men, not even knowing what the whole thing was about, sweating on, grinning, cackling, jabbering. It was insanity.

He shrugged. Rowan was motioning to them. Rick started striding out across the field, toward the plane that was to take him out of this. Rowan was calling now, telling him to hurry it. The plane was set. It had to go.

Then something went wrong with the usual order of such things. The way of it seemed casual enough. Rick didn't even see the coolie leave his barrel and it was Major Raab who shouted.

"Rick! Watch that man—"

The coolie started running toward him then. An almost naked little man, a harmless-looking little wisp of a man, but in his hand Rick saw the pistol. Saw it coming up.

Rick flopped into the dirt. He heard that first shot almost simultaneously, and then, against the plane and level with where he had stood a

moment previously, something went smash. That second shot, the one that hit the plane, would certainly have gotten him. He lay quite still, hugging the dirt. He heard a bellowing—the kind that startled, angry men will make. The little coolie stood there taking very careful aim at Rick.

Rick got that one last look. The coolie stood there like a matador, perfectly poised, taking his time, making it certain that this third try would not miss. And then, while something made a shrilling chatter, he was wrenched sideways through the air, twisted and tossed as if the bull had got him on its horns. He fell, crumpled, chopped up. A sergeant beside a fifty-millimeter-gun emplacement spat.

Raab came running up. Rowan just stared. Rick sat there in the dirt and looked at them, then looked toward the plane. And then he got up very carefully and went aboard. He raised his hand—a little half-wave. Outside, Raab held both hands above his head, clasped tight. The chopped up coolie sprawled so harmlessly there in the dust. Again, thickly, the sergeant who had shot him spat. The transport roared.

As they became airborne Rick had a sensation as though he'd swallowed something sharp. He could feel the corners of it gouging in his throat. He tried to gulp it down but it was stuck there. He spread his fingers on his knees, watching them. They shook.

Looks like, he thought, *I'm Section Eight. Maybe they'll let me do the easy paper dolls at first.*

A shot of bourbon helped and before he reached Karachi the butterflies had flown. He could look back then, mildly ashamed. A little punk with a gun, a pair of shots, and he'd let it get his goat. He could remember the splashing fire of contact incendiaries on the skin of his P-51, but somehow that was different. It was, he decided, the little punk. Just one little dark-skinned man charging onto the landing strip. That was more than just purposeful. That was insane. Too many guns for just one little dark-skinned man. Too many sergeants who could shoot and spit.

A coolie started running toward him, naked and harmless-looking. But in his hand Rick saw the pistol.

Of course he had not the slightest doubt that the little man was shooting at him personally. There'd been no random choice in that. Both of those shots, and that one which he'd never fired, had Rick Hale written on them. But why?

Rick caught himself fumbling something—the photograph of the girl. She was going with him—that face he'd found in the ice-capped mountains, slim and white—

Suddenly it came to him. He snapped his fingers. That was what there was about it that had fascinated him from the beginning, a similarity that he had not grasped. *A slim, white javelin.* Exactly like that tremendous shaft of wind which had caught the transport plane above the Hump and had whirled it deep toward Central Asia.

A javelin—a slim, white—

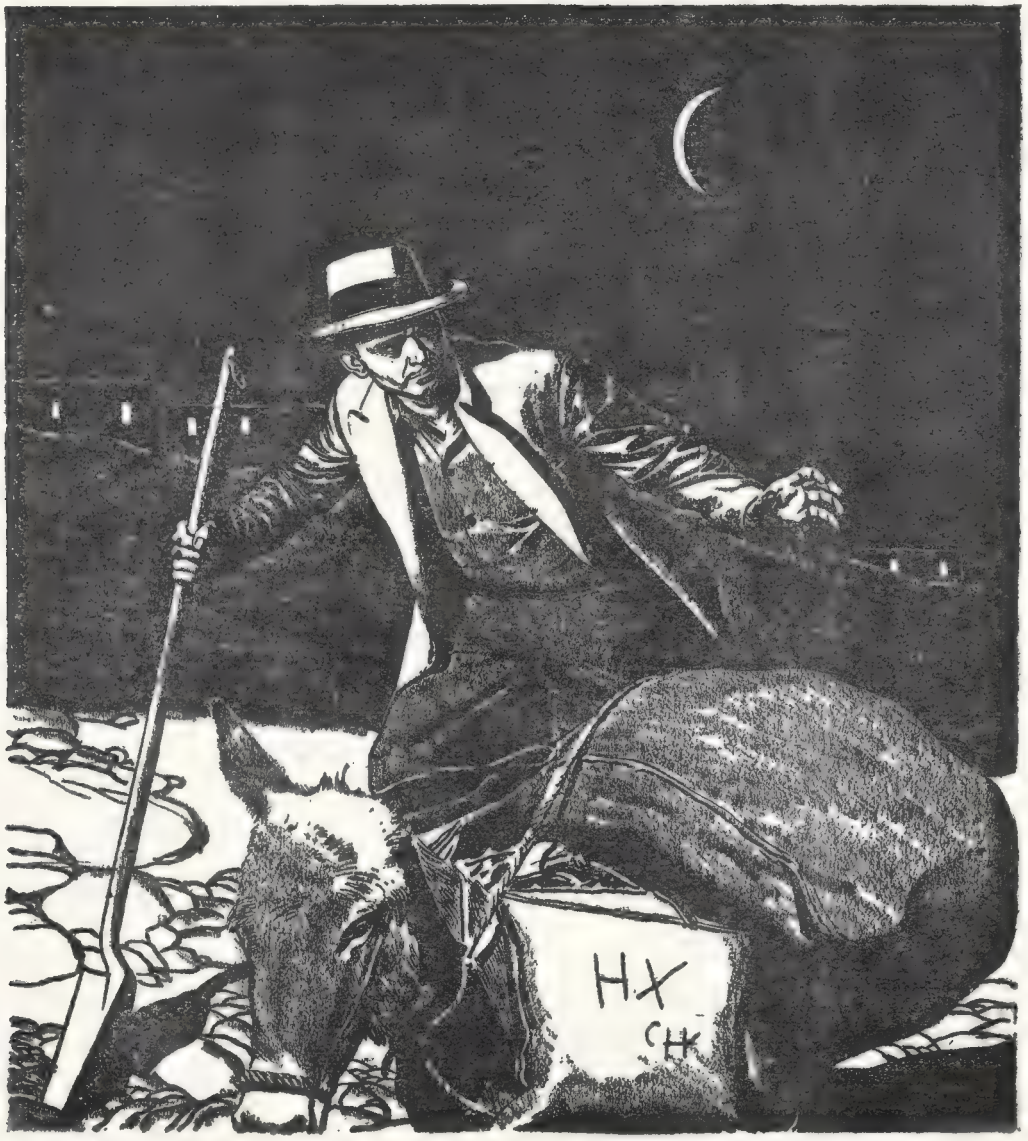
"Hale," he said, "let's face it, pal. You're nuts."

(End of Part I)

VILLAGE

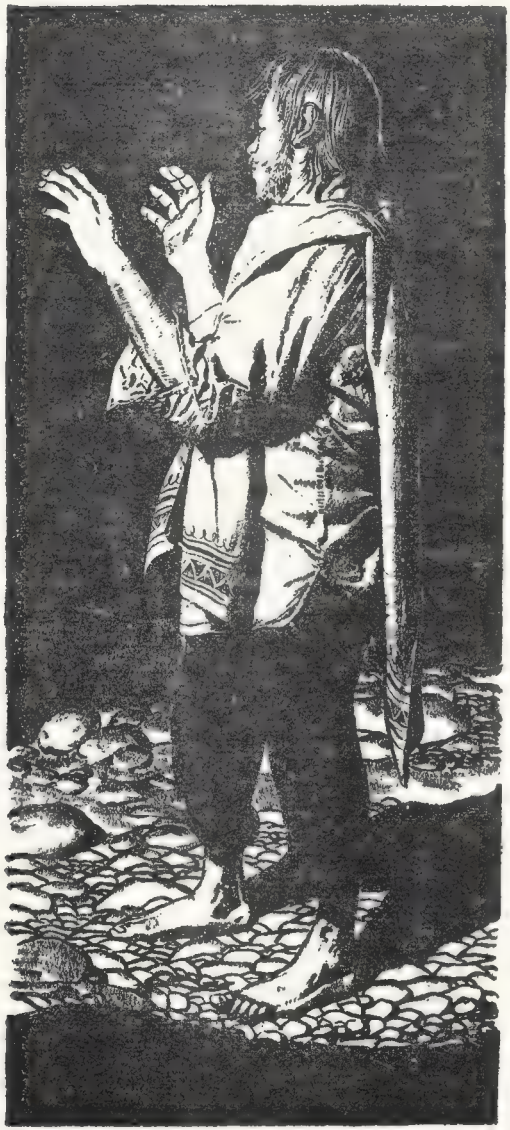
By

D. L. CHAMPION



OF DARKNESS

Old Miguel came out of his adobe house. He walked briskly toward Maxon, as briskly and surely as any man with vision. A sudden panic gripped Maxon when Miguel was less than two feet from him.



THREE of the four men whom Maxon had killed lay peaceful and silent in their graves. Though Peterson was as irrevocably dead as his predecessors, he was, as far as Maxon was concerned, infinitely more trouble in his present condition than he ever had been alive.

Peterson had left behind him certain assets which had not been possessed by Maxon's other victims; specifically, two eye witnesses to his violent death. Moreover, Peterson had been a man of wealth, position and influence.

As a result of these facts the long arm of the law had at last reached out for Maxon, had just managed to graze his coat-tails as he crossed the Texas border. He had arrived, breathless and apprehensive, in Mexico City.

He sat now in the Club El Patio, rhumba music pounding in his ears, cuba libras trickling down his gullet. Neither the music nor the rum assuaged the empty anxiety at the pit of his stomach.

Maxon was a little man with a sallow, sunken face and a pair of black brittle eyes which never twinkled. His body was as lithe and wiry as his mind. At eighteen he had become, of his own free will, a killer, a gangster and a thief. Now, twelve years later, he still devoted all his talents to the pursuit of these professions.

ILLUSTRATED BY
EARL EUGENE MAYAN

He had lived almost all his life in New York. He was limited in both vocabulary and vision. He had little learning and the part of it which stood him in good stead at this moment was the speaking knowledge of Spanish he had picked up from a Puerto Rican, a fellow felon with whom he had transacted several business dealings. He spoke and understood Spanish, although ungrammatically and with heavy Brooklyn overtones.

He lifted his eyes and caught the gaze of a passing waiter. *"Mesero,"* he said, *"Unomás."*

The man nodded and refilled Maxon's glass. Maxon moved uneasily in his chair, watching the dancers sweep across the vast dance floor.

He was eight hundred miles south of the border, yet that fact gave him no sense of security at all. There were telegraphs, telephones and extradition treaties and these devices functioning in unison might well send Maxon back to the utter finality of Sing Sing's death house.

Of course, he hadn't left everything to chance. He was too experienced a hand for that. He already had made a connection high up in Mexico City's police department—a connection which had cost him a thousand pesos in cash. And now, as he drained his glass, that connection approached his table and seated itself.

The connection was a short, fat man with a face like a chocolate moon. He was clad in a brown uniform with incredibly ornate buttons. His name was Sanchez—Capitano Sanchez—and his eyes were soft and benign. Sanchez, himself, was neither.

He ordered tequila and regarded Maxon affably.

"Amigo," he said, "it has come."

Maxon's face gave no hint of the skipped beat of his pulse. He said expressionlessly, "When? How?"

"This afternoon," said Sanchez. "At five o'clock. As for how . . . well, here."

He took a folded piece of paper from his pocket, handed it to Maxon. Maxon unfolded it with steady hands. He found himself staring at two reproductions of his own features, one profile, one full-face.

The text beneath the pictures was bilingual. The essence in both languages was that Maxon was a murderer, that there was a five hundred-dollar reward and that the forces of law and order in the United States would be ever so grateful if their comrades below the border would put the finger on him.

Maxon drew a deep breath, refolded the paper and put it in his own pocket.

"All right," he said, "tell me something."

Sanchez smiled over the edge of his glass, the epitome of obliging geniality. "Anything, my friend."

"There must be a million places to hide out in a country as god-forsaken as this," said Maxon. "Name one."

"One!" said Sanchez prodigally. "I shall name six. There is Campeche. There is Yucatan—though, perhaps, Yucatan is becoming a trifle too civilized in these days of air travel. There is Chiapas. Chiapas! That, doubtless, is it. Go to Chiapas, my friend."

"Chiapas," repeated Maxon. "I'll get out tonight. How do I get there?"

"Take the train to Oaxaca. Then take whatever you can get over whatever dirt roads you can find. That's all I can tell you."

"Thanks, pal," said Maxon. "So long and thanks."

He half rose from his chair. Sanchez put a hand on his arm and drew him back. "You have forgotten something, *amigo*. As a matter of fact, you have forgotten two things."

Maxon regarded him suspiciously.

"First," said Sanchez, "you must buy a drink to our parting. Second, there is the trifle of that twenty-five hundred pesos which you owe me."

Maxon's eyes narrowed and blazed. "I gave you a thousand pesos for letting me know when and if the alarm came through for me. I've paid you."

Sanchez beamed on him. *"Es verdad.* A thosand pesos for my information of the alarm. It is twenty-five hundred more that I do not arrest you."

Maxon was aware of an overwhelming sense of rage and helplessness.

Sanchez said, "I ask no profit. I ask you only the amount of the reward. I do not exploit my friends."

Maxon said harshly, "This is a holdup. I can't help myself. But, by God, there'll come a day—"

"But, of course," said Sanchez soothingly as he held out a pudgy palm.

Maxon counted the bills out into it. Then he stood up and strode from the room. Sanchez looked after him benignly. He put the money in his wallet and winked broadly at a blond tourist at the next table.

The blonde smiled back at him. That was a mistake on her part for which she would pay before the sun came up again and shone once more on the impressive peak of Popocatepetl.

MAXON wiped the sweat from his face with his handkerchief and climbed stiffly down from the burro which had brought him from *Ciudad Las Casas*. Before him stood the village of *Angel Albino Corzo* and he found its aspect not too disheartening.

He had traveled for seventeen days to arrive at this outpost of the world. No copper, or dodger, or telephone would ever follow him here.

The adobe walls of the houses shone bright in the noonday sun. The grass grew green be-

tween the uneven cobblestones of the winding streets. Trees, gnarled and ancient, huddled around the village as if to conceal it from prying eyes. The sky was incredibly blue and the purple and red of the bougainvillaea looked like a gay *mantilla*.

The gurgle of a stream came to his ears, the bark of a dog and the laughter of a playing child. All these things brought a sudden surcease to Maxon's troubled heart. He sighed and for the first time since Peterson had died, felt secure.

He paid the guide who had brought him, returned the hired burro and proceeded through the *pueblo* on foot. He walked down a wide street, observed women sitting in the adobe doorways. He noted and thought it odd that they did not lift their heads to look at him.

A dirty mongrel ran down the street. His coat was matted with filth. He trotted at an easy lope, traveling in a straight line, close to the white walls of the houses.

When he was almost upon Maxon the dog did a strange thing. He suddenly left his even course, swerved sharply out into the street, resumed his direction, then swung back again to the walls and continued toward Maxon. It was as if he had maneuvered to avoid some invisible object.

The animal was now less than ten yards from Maxon. And though he had apparently moved out of the way of something which wasn't there, he did not move out of the way of Maxon. His lowered head collided with Maxon's shin. The mongrel hesitated for a moment as Maxon moved aside, then proceeded on its way. Maxon stared after it, bewildered.

He shrugged his thin shoulders and stopped before a gnarled and ancient peon who stood on his doorway contemplating the skies with a blank gaze.

"*Señor,*" he said, "*por favor,* and where might a stranger find lodging for the night?"

The peon turned his vacuous eyes on Maxon.

"See *el señor doctor,*" he said. "His place is at the end of this street."

"*Gracias,*" said Maxon. He took a twenty-centavo piece from his pocket, proffered it. The old man made no move to take the money. His facial expression gave no indication that he was even aware of it. Maxon hesitated, returned the coin to his pocket, and proceeded down the street.

At its end, he came upon a more elaborate abode than he had yet seen. Its roof was tin instead of thatch; its walls were brick instead of adobe. The door was open. Maxon entered.

Dr. Elmer Reynaud was a thin man with big brooding eyes. His hair was sparse and sandy, inadequately covering a head far too large for his body. He was dressed in a spotless white linen suit. A solar topee rested on the chair at the side of his desk.

On the desk were two disordered piles of papers and a battered portable typewriter. He looked up as Maxon entered, surprise mirrored in his eyes.

He said, "A fellow *Americano?*"

Maxon's face lit up. He thrust out a hand.

"Say," he said, "you're from home, huh? I never expected to find an American in this hole. Say, this is fine. What are you doing here?"

"Research. On tropical diseases."

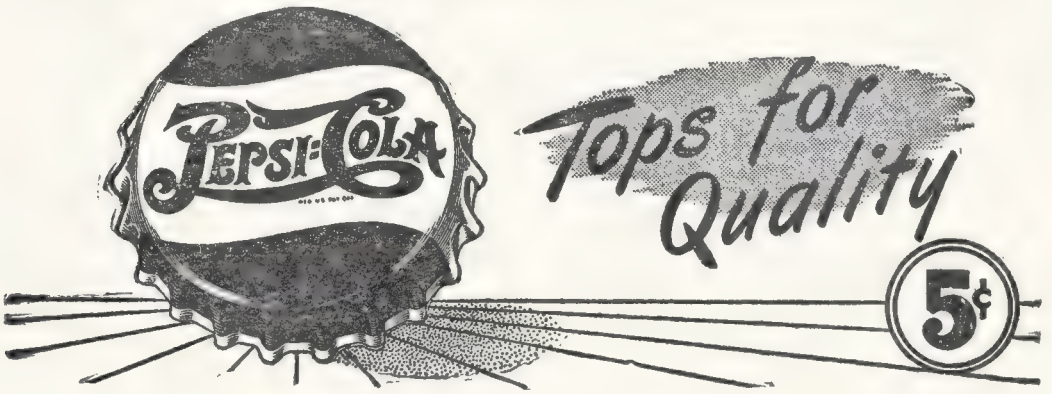
Reynaud's glance was now inquiring. Tacitly, he was asking the same question. Maxon noted the other's expression.

"Oh, me? I'm a writer. I'm down here for atmosphere and a quiet place to work. This seems to be ideal. I guess I'll hang around a while. Maybe a whole year."

Reynaud grunted. If he were incredulous, that incredulity did not show in his face. He said, "You can find rough but relatively clean accommodations at Señora Berta's place, about three blocks from here."

Maxon said, "Thanks," and sat down. He screwed up his brow. "Say, what's the matter in this burg? It's screwy. I just offered an old guy a tip. He didn't take it. I never seen that happen in Mexico before."

Reynaud smiled. There was pity rather than mirth in his smile.



He said quietly, "The old man didn't see your tip."

"Didn't see it? He was looking right at me. Then I met a screwy dog. He ducked something that wasn't there and then ran right into me."

"He didn't see you either," said Reynaud. "Both the man and the dog are blind."

"Blind?"

Reynaud nodded. "The entire village is blind."

Maxon stared at him in disbelief. "You mean all of them? Everyone?"

"Yes," said Reynaud. "Except the children. It hasn't hit them yet."

"*What* hasn't hit them?"

"Onchocercosis. The simullium fly. It bites and lays its eggs in the human skin. When it does so around the temple the hatching of those eggs destroys the optic nerves."

The sensation of security which had taken hold of Maxon as he had entered the village vanished.

"You mean that fly is around here?"

"For an area of over a thousand square miles. Almost every man and animal will contract it eventually. The kids keep their sight usually until adolescence. We don't know exactly why. I'm trying to find out.

"Take that dog you met, for instance. Obviously, he didn't go blind for some time. You say he ducked an obstacle which wasn't there. Doubtless, it *was* there while the dog was a pup and could still see. It was accustomed to moving out of the way of the obstacle. After it became blind that obstruction was removed—it may have been a pile of 'dobe—and now the dog, not seeing, still believes it's there. It's had a reflex built up."

Maxon hardly heard the last paragraph. He lit a cigarette nervously. He had found a perfect haven only to learn that it held a threat almost as bad as that from which he had fled. A thought came to him.

"Why don't you get it?"

"I probably will. But it doesn't matter if I do."

"You mean you can cure it?"

"Easily."

"Then why don't you cure these guys here?"

"They're too poor. They have no money. Perhaps, though I shall cure their children."

Maxon's eyes narrowed. He wasn't quite sure that he understood. He said, "And what about me? Will it bite me?"

"Probably. But you needn't worry. You have money, haven't you?"

"Plenty." He paused and stood up. He regarded Reynaud for a long thoughtful moment. "And if I have dough I can get cured, eh?"

The doctor nodded.

"I think I get it," Maxon said. "O.K., pal." He moved toward the door. "What was that dame's name again? Berta?"

"Berta," said Reynaud. After Maxon had gone he sat thoughtfully for a long time before he resumed his work.

THE end of his first week in *Angel Albino Corzo* found Maxon relaxed and, to his surprise, not bored. The sureness of the villagers, deprived of their sight, was a source of constant wonder to him.

Big Señora Berta moved around the house as if she had perfect sight. The other inhabitants acted as if they had memorized every cobblestone in the street while they still retained their eyes. They never stumbled, never hesitated.

Maxon watched the lumbering oxen pulling a primitive cart through the town. The off ox would hesitate as he entered the street, feel for the wall of the houses with his horn, then move forward again, his wide blank eyes staring straight ahead and seeing nothing.

Half a dozen times Maxon had shaken his head and cursed his luck. If there were only some dough in the town, if there were only something of value, it would have been as easy as—he grinned as he thought of the trite simile—as taking pennies from a blind man.

He avoided Reynaud and wondered also if Reynaud were avoiding him. Reynaud could see, all right. Maxon felt as if those dark brooding eyes saw too much. He felt uncomfortable in the doctor's presence.

Then one morning he stumbled on the village *el dorado*. He was at breakfast in Señora Berta's garden. His orange juice shone golden in the sun. Humming birds flickered in and out of the bougainvillaea. He noticed three peons enter the village, their backs bowed beneath the weight of the sacks they carried. They moved slowly, aching, like men with a great exhaustion upon them.

"*Dígame*," he said to Berta, "who are those men?"

"What men, *señor?*"

Maxon described the group. Berta shrugged her fat shoulders. "*Quién sabe, señor?* Some peons gathering corn from the fields outside the village."

Maxon shook his head. It certainly wasn't corn. Judging from the weary gait of the bearers it was something more like iron ore. He drained his coffee cup, stood up and followed the sightless procession.

In the center of the pueblo, they turned to the east, moved into an alley behind a row of houses and entered a shed having but three walls. There, they emptied their sacks onto a pile of what seemed to be pebbles of various sizes. In the yard beyond, half a dozen children played at bull fighting.

Maxon watched for a moment and went away, resolved to return later in the day when there were no children with curious eyes to spy upon him.

At ten o'clock the village slept. There was a light burning in Reynaud's office; stars sprinkled the clear sky. But that was all, save the glimmer of Maxon's flashlight, as he stood over the pile of pebbles in the three-walled shed.

He knew at once what he had stumbled upon. It was gold ore, ore which had been panned from the bed of some river. There wasn't a great deal of it, perhaps ten burro loads, and he had no idea what it was worth.

However, it obviously was worth something and even more obviously it could easily be stolen. And the moment that these facts became clear, Maxon acted almost by reflex.

He could borrow a burro, load the animal at night and drive it out into the countryside. There he could bury the ore, and dig it up again when he dared return to civilization. Even if it wasn't worth much, it wouldn't cost him a great deal of effort.

His walk was jaunty and he was quite pleased with himself as he returned to his whitewashed room in *Señora* Berta's.

Three nights later, he hired the burro and stole a shovel and some bags. He shoveled the ore into the bags, loaded the bags on the animal's back. Digging was tough, sweaty work, but he finished a good two hours before dawn.

Then, as he was leaving the shed for the last time, old Miguel came out of his adobe house. Maxon never knew if the sound of his labor had aroused the ancient blind man or if insomnia had driven him out for a breath of air.

The old man stretched his arms and yawned. Maxon watched him through narrowed lids. The burro shook its head, opened its mouth and uttered a harsh, shattering neigh.

Miguel stiffened. He walked briskly toward Maxon, as briskly and surely as any man with vision. A sudden panic gripped Maxon. He forgot for an instant that the man was blind. He felt only that once again he had been seen red-handed while committing a crime.

When Miguel was less than two feet from him he swung. The old man cried out and fell. Maxon threw himself upon him, his fists pummeling the peon's face.

Miguel's hands reached out and grasped the lapels of Maxon's coat. Then, slowly, they released the fabric as Maxon's fists frantically beat consciousness out of his adversary.

Maxon stood up, panting, as reason slowly returned to him. Miguel was, of course, blind. He had seen nothing. There were no witnesses, after all.

Maxon laughed shortly and without mirth. He turned, kicked the burro and the animal plodded ahead.

When Miguel was less than two feet from him he swung. The old man cried out and fell.

REYNAUD came to him the following morning as he was finishing his breakfast. His face was immobile and his big eyes accusing. He said, "Maxon, did you come here to commit robbery and assault?"

"Me?" said Maxon.

"You," said Reynaud. "Who else would steal that ore? Who else would beat up that old man?"

Maxon smiled. "You can't prove anything. And even if you could, what law is there out here that could deal with it?"

"No," said Reynaud. "I can't prove anything. And the village *presidente* couldn't cope with the situation if I could. You're right there, Maxon. But do you know what you have done? You've done more than murder."

Maxon swallowed the last of his second egg, then looked up inquiringly.

"They panned that ore," said Reynaud, "out of the Jacate River. It's a poor bed for panning. They walk two hundred miles each way during what little time they can spare from their crops."

"Do they?" said Maxon with polite interest. "And for what? What can they spend it on around here?"

"It was not for them," said Reynaud, "but for their children. It was to be used to cure their children of blindness when they contracted the disease."

Maxon stared at him and a slow smile broke over his face. "I get it now, Doc. I'm stepping in on your racket. Is that it?"

Reynaud looked puzzled. "My racket?"

"Sure. You know how to cure these guys. But you ain't going to do it without a fee. So the old folks have no dough. So you send 'em out to collect gold and promise to cure the kids if they collect enough to pay you your price."

Reynaud sighed. "You really believe that, Maxon?"

"Go away," said Maxon. "You got your racket—I got mine. I'm just a little smarter than you are, that's all. Send those muggs out for more gold. But you'd better hide it from me this time."

Reynaud shook his head. Silently, he turned on his heel and made his way over the rough cobblestones.

Maxon awakened one morning some six weeks after his arrival in the village. There was an ache in his head and a steady dull pain throbbed at his temples. He arose and examined himself in the mirror.

At his temple he observed a tiny irritated area. It was red and itchy. He dressed and shaved, aware of some slight worry. Then he remembered that he had plenty of paper pesos in his pocket, and although he didn't like Reynaud he was certain that the doctor was a man who would perform a task if the price were right.

After breakfast he walked through the bright sunshine to Reynaud's office.

The doctor's examination was no more than cursory. He moved away from Maxon, sat down at his desk.

"That's it, Maxon," he said. "Onchocercosis. The simullium fly."

Maxon blinked. The ache in his temples became alarming.

"And if I let it go, I'll be—like them?" He jerked his head in the direction of the street.

Reynaud nodded without lifting his eyes. "Exactly like them."

Maxon took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He was unreasonably proud of the fact that his hand was steady.

"You told me that I wouldn't have to worry about the fly."

Reynaud said, "Did I?" and proceeded to peruse a paper on his desk.

"You did," said Maxon. "There's a cure, isn't there?"

"Indeed."

"All right," said Maxon. "I get it. It's a holdup but you've got me. How much?"

At last Reynaud looked up. His dark eyes stared into Maxon's brittle black pupils. Somehow, that look disconcerted Maxon. His voice was high-pitched and excited as he spoke again.

"Well, how much? I'll pay it. You told me you got a cure. You told me you wouldn't use it on the old people but maybe on the kids. So they went out to pan gold to pay you for the kids. I'm no dope. You want dough like anyone else. All right, how much for me?"

Reynaud shook his head slowly. "Maxon," he said, "you are a man of limited understanding. If I wanted money do you think I'd be spending my life down here? You have a low opinion of me. But, then, there's no reason why you should hold a better opinion of me than you do of yourself."

Maxon took a deep breath. The ache in his temples increased and with it a sense of bewilderment.

"I don't know what you're talking about. If you don't want dough, what do you want? You've *got* to cure me."

Reynaud put down his pen. There was an odd appraising expression in his eyes.

He said, "Maxon, you have beaten up a helpless old blind man. You have stolen and cached a few thousand pesos' worth of gold. And you are going blind."

"You can't prove it. No one can prove anything. No one saw me."

"No one saw you," agreed Reynaud gravely. "I'll tell you my price. Put the gold back, Maxon."

Maxon frowned. He suspected for a moment that this was a trap and opened his mouth to haggle. Then he felt a sudden sharp pain behind his eyes and a ripple of fear coursed down his spine.

"If I find the ore," he said, "and mind you, I'm admitting nothing—if I find it, will you give me the cure?"

"Yes."

"All right. Get a couple of muggs with shovels. I'll tell them where to dig."

A THOUSAND meters beyond the village two peons dug deep. In his office, Reynaud's pen scratched over the foolscap. Maxon sat, his back to the wall. He smoked incessantly. There was sweat on his brow and his shirt was stained. He stared straight ahead.

Two hours later, a man, dirty and begrimed, thrust his head through the doorway.

"Señor el doctor," he said, *"lo tenemos."*

"All of it?"

"Si, señor."

Reynaud waved him from the room. Maxon stood up. "All right. Are you satisfied?"

"Quite," said Reynaud.

"Then what do I do to get rid of this?"

Reynaud smiled faintly. "Go home, Maxson."

Maxson's eyes widened. His hands clenched. "What is this? A gag? What's the cure?"

"I just gave it to you. Go home, Maxson."

"I can't go—" Maxson took a step forward. "Stop clowning," he snarled. "Tell me how to beat this damned thing."

"I've told you twice, Maxson. Sit down. I'll explain it to you."

Maxson sat down. His teeth were set and he breathed audibly.

"The larvae of the fly which bit you, Maxson, cannot live in a temperate climate. Only in this tropical heat can those eggs in your temple survive. That is why I cannot cure these people. They have no money. Hence, they cannot leave their homes, their lands, and go to strange places. They will, therefore, remain blind all their lives.

"For the sake of the children they have spent what few days they can spare from the arduous task of making a living in panning a little gold, enough to get their children north before the optical nerves are eaten away entirely. Do you understand, Maxson? All you need do is go away. Go away to a temperate climate and the larvae will die. You will be completely cured, Maxson."

Maxson breathed deeply. He swallowed something in his throat, said, "Where's a temperate climate?"

Reynaud shrugged. "Mexico City, on the plateau. The United States. The Argentine, France, England. Most of the world. But not here. Nor in Central America."

Maxson said, "I can't get to them places. I'd have to have a passport to do that. I can't get a passport."

"You don't need a passport to go back to Mexico City or back home to the States."

"I can't go to Mexico City. I can't go to the States."

Reynaud eyed him shrewdly. "I think I can guess why."

"You needn't guess," said Maxson wildly. "I'll tell you. They'll kill me if I went back. They want me. They want to kill me. I can't go."

"What state are you from?"

"New York. Why?"

"Electrocution is the death penalty there, isn't it?"

Maxson's mouth opened. His tongue moved and his larynx vibrated. No words came. Instead he mouthed a harsh inarticulate sound.

"What's south of here? Isn't there a border I can get across?"

"Sure. Nicaragua—Honduras. They're not too strict. Five hundred pesos should get you over one of those borders without any trouble."

"Is that a temp-temperate climate?"

"It's tropical as hell!" said Reynaud. "Hotter than here."

Maxson put both hands to his head and groaned. "My God," he said, "what am I going to do?"

Reynaud looked at him for a long time. When he spoke there was neither pity nor mercy in his tone.

"You have a choice, Maxson. Go back home and burn. Or stay here and lose your sight. What you did back home I don't know, but whenever I think of you I shall also think of a thief who steals pennies from blind men, who beats helpless sightless ancients into unconsciousness. Now I would appreciate it if you would get out of my office, Maxson. I have work to do."

Maxson staggered out into the blazing day. Like a drunken man he reeled up the uneven street. He stared straight ahead as he went, stared at the greenery of the trees, at the whiteness of the adobe walls, at the deep brown of the earth and the turquoise blue of the sky.

He stared at it all greedily, like a marooned sailor drinking the last draught of water on his raft, stared at it until his head ached with the effort, trying to crowd it all indelibly into his memory before the eternal night came down and he would never be able to see it again.

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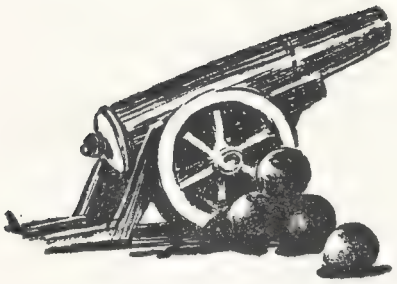
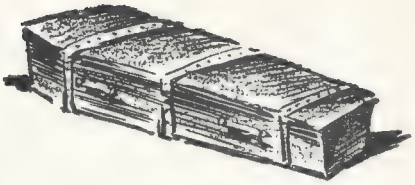


By
MERLE CONSTINER

JOHN RYECROFT sat alone in the careening stage, his portmanteau between his knees, the spring night churning past, plucking the hickory framework to groans and trebles. He knew the driver was drunk and suspected the horses were drunk, too. The year was 1830, and back in Wolf Scalp that had seemed a good omen. "Three" was the little schoolmaster's lucky number. He was nearing his goal but he was too weary to be elated. The journey had been long and hard: out of the hills on foot to Marietta, down the Ohio deck passenger to Cincinnati, and now due north by coach twenty miles to Dandridge.

The stage came to a slewing stop. Through the window Mr. Ryecroft saw deep woods and a moonlit clearing with a roadside cabin of barked logs. Saddle horses were tethered in the yard and fiddle music came through the open door. A country dance. Mr. Ryecroft smiled benevolently. The driver dismounted and entered the cabin. Mr. Ryecroft ran over a few conjugations, listened to the tree frogs, thought about his collection of pressed ferns.

The boy said dully, "I should've cut yore throat when I had the chance. I'm not yore apprentice, and you know it."



MR. BIBBS

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK KRAMER

The coachman appeared in the doorway. He was a big man with a beard like a fresh mink pelt; a buxom farm wench was tucked under one arm, a wicker demijohn under the other. "This heah's Dandridge," he called loudly. "Good-by!"

"That statement," Mr. Ryecroft said coldly,

Mr. Ryecroft realized it wasn't a baboon at all, but an apish, overgrown boy.

"is pregnant with fraud and deceit. I've paid my fare and—"

"Henry," the coachman called, "reach me that half finished single-tree over thur by the fahrplace!"

Mr. Ryecroft alighted with dignity. "I am averse to violence, sir," he declared severely. "However, I shall withhold my custom from you in the future." He picked up his portmanteau, and walked down the road.

Great trees, chestnut and burroak and honey locust, made a fragrant arch above his head and the silvery dust beneath his feet was boot-sole deep. He was a small man, sinewy enough, but he was getting along in years; fatigue numbed his knee and elbow joints. He carried his portmanteau with great care by its backwoods strap of plaited rawhide, for it contained the sum total of his chattels—a quilt, a few kitchen utensils, four schoolbooks, a horn-handled razor, and a bottle of Mother Sperry's Kidney-Fat Rheumatic Ointment. He wondered about the time and in lieu of a watch he took from his pocket an almanac, struck a lucifer, and read *April 24, Moon rises 9:44, Sign Scorpio. Gunpowder can be made at home: Nitre 75, Sulphur 10, Charcoal of Dogwood 15. Slumber at the Harrow, Sparrow on the Morrow, A Chastened Child is a Joyous Child.*

Moonrise at nine forty-four. He judged the moon's climb from the horizon and calculated it must be around ten-thirty. This worried him a little. He didn't like to get into town so late; he was afraid Dandridge might form a false opinion of him. Respectable persons were behind locked doors and in bed by nine.

The timber thinned to underbrush. Down below him in a valley he saw a sprangle of gold-

en lights, and the sheen of the canal, and knew he'd reached his destination. Just at the edge of town a patch forked from the pike and led through a lonesome swale. Since this appeared to be a short cut, the little schoolmaster took it.

A finger of cloud pushed out toward the moon and there was a smell of coming rain in the air. This desolate terrain, wild and grassy, dotted with elderberry and pawpaw, he knew was the town common where Dandridge held its fairs and outdoor festivals. Here and there were scattered queer mound-shaped structures of black brush—the previous year's peddlers' booths, built crudely of tree branches, built, and used, and now forgotten. As he made his way through the rank fennel, he observed a red glow from within the nearest booth.

Rapidly, he reviewed Pliny, and a Caesarius of Heisterbach, and other learned and reliable authorities on the natural, preternatural, and supernatural. Since no satisfactory answer presented itself, and his path took him directly past the front of the booth anyway, he solved the problem by peering in.

The sight that met his mild gaze struck him rigid with amazement.

A MAN-SIZED baboon, dressed in a foul leather apron and tattered jean shirt, sat on its heels before a small fire. The animal's face, beneath a broad-brimmed hat, was flat and meaty, with lucid china-blue eyes. Its chest, showing through rent cloth, rolled in muscles; its feet were bare and clay-smeared. Big hands produced and lighted a corncob pipe. A sawtooth voice asked violently, "What you got in that box, mister?"

Then Mr. Ryecroft realized it wasn't a baboon at all, but a man. And, progressively, he saw it wasn't even a man. It was a boy, an apish, overgrown boy about sixteen years old. Mr. Ryecroft felt considerably relieved; he knew boys. He smiled. "Don't you think you ought to be home in bed, young fellow? It's thoughtless little acts like these that cause our parents such needless anxiety—"

The boy stared at him until Mr. Ryecroft became annoyed. A small knife with a short wicked blade, a cobbler's knife, somehow appeard in the boy's hand. With great care he trimmed a twig into a toothpick, asked dully, "What you got in your box?"

Being an honest man, and tolerant, Mr. Ryecroft tallied off the contents of his portmanteau. The boy frowned. "The whole sorry passell ain't worth a York shillin'!"

"A man's character is not to be judged by his worldly—"

"How much money you carryin' on you?"

"Not very much," Mr. Ryecroft announced ruefully. "I've just bought a tavern and that cut me down to bedrock. Maybe you've heard of it, the Red Buck Inn?"

The boy made no answer. Firelight danced across the rosy knobs on his cheekbones. Suddenly, sympathy showed in his clear blue eyes. "Take keer o' yoreself, chawbacon."

Mr. Ryecroft looked puzzled. "Chawbacon?"

"Them home-tanned shoes squeak like a pair o' fightin' jaybirds an' I bet they's sheep ticks wove into the wool o' that homespun coat. Tell me, you got a bundle of sassafras root in your waistcoat pocket?"

"No," Mr. Ryecroft said coldly, "I have not." He didn't mention that he'd laid out a bundle of the root on the kitchen table, ready to bring, but had forgotten it.

Cryptically, the boy asked, "How they been treatin' you?"

Mr. Ryecroft pretended not to hear. He swung his portmanteau against his knee and started down the path. In Marietta he'd paid thirty cents for an eight-cent meal, on the boat they'd stolen his father's watch, in Cincinnati a man had arrested him in an alley, charged him with willful traveling on Sunday, and it had cost him a dollar and his cat's-eye ring, paid on the spot, to obtain his release.

But that was all over now. He had in his breast pocket ownership papers to one of Dandridge's most profitable inns. The papers were airtight, too; he'd had them checked by a competent attorney.

This stroke of good fortune had come about in a remarkable way. He'd been splitting shingles one evening, back on Wolf Scalp Ridge, to patch the schoolhouse, when Captain Falconer happened by. The captain had reined in his bay gelding and introduced himself. There had been a moment of embarrassment, however, when it was inadvertently divulged that Mr. Ryecroft was not a Congressman whom the captain had once seen escorting two lovely ladies in an opera box in Washington.

In apology for this blunder, the captain had spread a fine linen cloth on a tree stump, produced a hamper of food and silverware from his gig, and insisted that Mr. Ryecroft join him at table. It had been a pleasant and edifying meal. Mr. Ryecroft felt attracted to the blunt-talking stranger and had sensed that his admiration was somewhat reciprocated. In the twilight, just as the whippoorwills were beginning to call, Mr. Ryecroft had listened to the captain's suggestion that he give up teaching, come to town, and spend his declining years in comfortable circumstances.

Captain Falconer had explained that he was a businessman, an agent for a certain Azarias Bibbs of Dandridge, a town some distance away. This Mr. Bibbs had more irons in the fire than he could handle: ferry-houses, toll-gates; whiskey, flour and pork down the river to New Orleans; a woolen factory, and heaven knows what else. He owned, as a matter of fact, half the canal town of Dandridge. Among Mr. Bibbs' establishments was the Red Buck Inn; the pe-

culiar thing about this hostelry was that it was too flourishing, it required too much of Mr. Bibbs' energy and too much of his valuable time to run. Now Dandridge, as the captain had said, was a canal town, the portal through which the great agricultural products of fertile farm land poured down to the Ohio, and south to the Gulf. In a few weeks the waters would be right and the spring rush would be on. A canal town is a tavern town.

Dusk-dark was filtering into the clearing when the captain, after shaking hands with Mr. Ryecroft, had bid him a hearty good-by. A parting impulse had forced him to confide that Mr. Bibbs' asking price for the Red Buck was five hundred—but if he was approached firmly, and with cash, it might be procured for as little as half that.

Alone, Mr. Ryecroft had returned to the classroom. Sharpening a Nottingham quill, he'd written the first of a series of letters which was eventually to make him a property owner, to Mr. Azarias Bibbs, care of the Red Buck Inn. He'd also written the Dandridge postmaster; in a cautiously worded note he represented himself obliquely as a surveyor, intimated that he anticipated a trip into that general territory, and made inquiries about the Red Buck's reputation. Mr. Bibbs had replied that he would deed away his inn for two thousand dollars; the postmaster's answer had vouched for the Red Buck's respectability, as well as its owner's, Mr. Bibbs; venturing the opinion, moreover, that Mr. Ryecroft would indeed be fortunate to secure quarters there as it was a house most popular with the better class of gentry.

Five haggling letters had brought Mr. Bibbs' price down to one hundred and fifty dollars. Mr. Ryecroft had sent the sum, his life savings, to the Dandridge bank to be placed in escrow, and a few weeks later, had duly and properly received his papers of ownership.

CHAPTER II

DECEPTION COMMITTEE

AS the threat of rain increased, the moon lost its burnish, paled, and was sucked backward into a veil of mist, and the sky blackened. By the time John Ryecroft passed the first of the outlying cabins that formed a ragged fringe about the town, haze lay over the valley and his collar and cuffs were damp with formless moisture. These rutted back streets were little more than cowpaths; twice he was forced to climb stiles. Invisible dogs, relaying the news of his advance, kept up an incessant barking and he wished he had with him his ten-foot hickory reminding-rod reposing on its antler rack back in the Wolf Scalp schoolhouse. After a bit, cottages began to cluster and the walking became easier. He came to a glazed brick sidewalk, and now the houses were built side-by-side, and flush to the walk, in blocks, so that he passed a mathematical procession of little stone doorsteps and green shuttered windows. He turned left at an intersection and suddenly found himself on what was obviously the town's main thoroughfare.

The street was a good three wagons wide, flanked on either side by shops and offices and liveries and taverns, both brick and frame; the brick was new but the frame, he supposed, must be log embellished with clapboard siding. Almost all the buildings were painted and he was overcome by such a show of wealth. Such priceless items as glass and iron were everywhere on display, iron railings, iron balconies, fine glass windows; he considered the labor expense in hand-wrought nails alone and the arithmetical permutations dizzied him. Back in Wolf Scalp he'd entertained the secret hope that sometime, after he'd proved himself, he might possibly, if luck was with him, become a member of the town council. Now, dripping and hungry and tired, he pushed that boastful thought from his mind.

The mist had now become a steady drizzle. A few shop windows, still lit despite the lateness of the hour, glimmered here and there along the storefronts in soft gold, and now and then a door would open, dropping a pencil of light out into the muggy night, across the wet slate pavement, down into the cobbled curb. The street was deserted but for a beggar in an areaway with his coatskirts over his head, and three young tosspots, by the town watering trough, with their arms about each other's shoulders tripod fashion, singing a five-part glee with gusto. Mr. Ryecroft passed the beggar by, questioned the young gentlemen, and somehow, between baritone and alto, learning his directions, set out formally to establish residence. He was soaked clear through to his long calico underdrawers.

His heart almost missed a beat when he finally came upon it. The shield-shaped wooden sign which hung on a bracket over the sidewalk said: *Red Buck Inn, A. Bibbs, Owner—Capt. J. Falconer, Prop.* That, he decided, could be changed in the morning with a brush and a bit of gilt paint. Midway, in a row of dignified offices and better class shops, it faced courtsquare on the left, a highly enviable location. Its gray-stone front was narrow, but impressive, and ran up three full stories to sedate, copper eaves. Mr. Roycroft pressed his spatulate, ink-stained thumb on the ornate latch, opened the door, and entered.

He was in a wide hall, floored with red carpet, and ceilinged with polished cross-timbers; doors, three on the left and two on the right, led off the hall, and at the far end a cherry ram's-horn with a slender banister pointed the way

to the chambers upstairs, the guest rooms. A nightlight burned weakly in a glass box suspended from the rafters overhead. Now that Mr. Ryecroft had reached his destination, curiosity, coupled with what he imagined was the business instinct, took possession of him and he allowed himself the pleasure of a cursory inspection of his newly acquired home.

The two doors on the right opened onto a sort of sitting room, and music room, each empty, and each dark. Returning to the front of the hall, he started down the left side. The first door here was in fact a double door, and wide open, and seeing that the room was brightly lighted, he stepped inside. He found himself in the tavern's parlor-bar, completely nonplussed by its elegance. Here, too, the carpet was turkey-red; an expensive Balloon Illuminator lamp, burning clarified lard oil, bathed the cherry wainscoting in soft silver. There was a short rosewood bar, with a battery of imported liquors, gleaming in iridescent crystalware. The room was empty.

Mr. Ryecroft stood for a moment in the center of the carpet, meditating. A pool of water gathered about his boot soles; he wiped the back of his neck with his coat cuff. He was trying to decide whether he would permit the bar to remain, or whether he'd convert its space to a cultural lyceum hall. He wasn't averse to taking a medicinal drop himself when the occasion called for it, but he'd read some extremely startling pamphlets on the effect of spirits on a man's moral outlook. He decided it was a decision that could wait. He went behind the bar, selected a vase-shaped bottle of Nantz brandy and poured himself a half tumblerful to keep off the ravages of the weather. This done, he took quill and ink and paper from the desk behind the bar and wrote: *6 ozs. brandy, to John Ryecroft, Proprietor.* He liked to be orderly about small things. He returned to the center of the room and inspected a brocade chair.

A worried-looking man in an apron, obviously the bartender, came through a door at the rear and took his position behind the bar. He ignored Mr. Ryecroft. Mr. Ryecroft smiled tolerantly, placed his portmanteau by the wall, and passed into the room from which the barman had just emerged.

He stepped into a small office so sumptuously outfitted that for an instant he hardly recognized it for what it was. The carpet and walls were dusty blue, there was gilt moulding about the window, and the furniture, a few chairs, a delicate table, and an escritoire, were of buttery, golden maple. A man sat at the table, eating. He was a small man, elaborately dressed in a bright blue double-milled Newmarket coat, open down the front so that it revealed its lavender silk lining, and blue cassimere panta-

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Directed by WILLIAM THIELE
A REPUBLIC PICTURE

loons, ornately ribbed. He was fat-cheeked but sallow, and his little eyes, deep in shadowed sockets, protruded slightly, as though he were about to sneeze. On a fine English platter before him was the bony carcass of a fowl, like a miniature ship under construction, and he was busying himself picking flakes of meat from the bird's ribs with a silver nutpick. Mr. Ryecroft said pleasantly, "I'd like to see Mr. Azarias Bibbs."

THE man spoke in a hoarse whisper. "I am Mr. Bibbs." He studied Mr. Ryecroft's dripping homespun with distaste. "Just stand up against the wall there, sir"—he pointed with his silver nutpick—"and be silent. Your arrival at this moment is very propitious. We may need you as a witness." The whole speech was delivered *sotto voce*, as though he had a very bad cold.

Mr. Ryecroft was in the habit of issuing commands, not obeying them. He stood his ground, said, "I am John Ryecroft, sir. From Wolf Scalp. I—"

"Of course, of course." Urgency crept into Mr. Bibbs' whisper. "I must ask you to keep your voice down, sir. A man is dying in the back room."

Mr. Ryecroft, a man of tender heart, was wracked with sympathy. "How grievous. A relative, sir?"

"No, but a dear and close friend. My business manager, Captain Justin Falconer. He's been badly pistoled, and within the hour. Dr. Vanzart is attending him," Mr. Bibbs explained rapidly. "It's most bewildering, I must say. The barking dog, and the dueling pistol, and all. Of course the captain is a man of violent temper but that hardly explains—"

Mr. Ryecroft said gently, "The captain is a friend of mine, too. He sold me—"

The oaken door to the back room opened and a man thrust out his head and shoulders; he was a young man, coated in good black broadcloth, and his glossy muttonchop whiskers, as yet not of mature growth, were carefully cultivated and trimmed. He said, "You gentlemen may come in now."

Alarm spread over Mr. Bibbs' moonface. He got to his feet. "Gad! Don't tell me he's dead, doctor. So soon! Just think, how a little leaden pellet can devastate such a noble frame!"

"He's not dead," Dr. Vanzart explained. "In fact he appears to be on the way to possible recovery." He paused, added impressively, "You may see him, but you mustn't talk with him."

Mr. Ryecroft followed his host into the back room.

This was evidently the manager's bedroom. Not large, it was well appointed; there was a tall walnut bed with a tester, several English chairs, a high French armoire, a Spanish liquor cabinet of carved oak. Leaded casement windows opened on a side court; there were two doors, the hall door, and another leading to the office. Beneath an Argand lamp, bandages, a basin of water, and an assortment of steel medical instruments gave evidence of Dr. Vanzart's recent operation. A man lay on the coverlet of the bed. A wounded man, and to Mr. Ryecroft, who was not unversed in injuries and sickness and death, it appeared to be a seriously wounded man. In his private unspoken opinion, which was an opinion based upon multiple experience, this man lived only by the grace of God.

It was Captain Falconer, all right. You couldn't miss that pugnacious jaw and those black, joining eyebrows. But it was not the buoyant, convivial Captain Falconer who had stopped his gig at Wolf Scalp and persuaded Ryecroft to forsake hardship for a life of comfort. Now Captain Falconer's eyes were glassy, his face drained of blood; his head was propped up by a large pillow and the colors beneath the lamp glare were the blue of the ticking through the open end of the pillow slip, the crimson of blood on the coverlet, and the china-white gleam of teeth in the captain's half open mouth.

Mr. Bibbs said softly, affectionately, "Hold on, old fellow. Everything'll be all right."

Captain Falconer showed no sign of life. Just a weak, rhythmic breathing.

Dr. Vanzart frowned. "We mustn't address him. I've removed the bullet, applied agaric of oak, a bit of styptic water and lint, and given him a clyster to purge him of harmful humors. He must keep perfectly quiet and abstain from anger, fear, excessive joy, and venery. This is the treatment and advice offered by our greatest medical authorities. I think you'll find it sufficient. How did it happen, by the way?"

Mr. Bibbs said bitterly, "A man made a noise like a barking dog!"

Dr. Vanzart pursed his youthful lips. Mr. Ryecroft looked interested.

"I was in the other room, eating," Mr. Bibbs went on. "I heard the shot and ran in here and out into the court. Captain Falconer lay on the slates, blood pouring from his chest. Beside him was a pearl-handled dueling pistol which I recognized as my own. I carried him inside. He was able to talk a little. He said that he'd heard a dog barking in the court, had grabbed up the pistol and rushed out to exterminate it. The captain despised dogs in the court. They're so ungenteel. He'd just stepped out into the mist when someone cut him down."

Mr. Ryecroft, despite himself, asked a question. In a shocked voice, he inquired, "Didn't the captain have a pocket gun, a weapon of his own?"

"Of course." Mr. Bibbs looked irritated. "I'm just telling you what he told me." He pointed. "It's over there—"

Mr. Ryecroft walked across the room. On the

narrow marble mantel-shelf was a handsome weapon, a pearl-handled pistol with an engraved barrel, stock set at an angle to allow the user to assume the traditional dueling posture. Mr. Ryecroft picked it up, turned it over.

"It was meant for me!" Mr. Bibbs was saying to the doctor. "I'll swear it was meant for me."

"You mean someone mistook the captain for you?" The doctor was incredulous.

"No, not that." Mr. Bibbs' voice was strained, petulant. "I mean that I have a bad heart and someone's trying to strike me here." He slapped his fist over his ribs. "They're trying to get me by shock! They know the captain's my nearest and dearest friend and that his death would be a catastrophic blow to me."

Dr. Vanzart packed his kit, said, "Fiddlesticks."

They heard the mattress squeak and turned to face the sound. Captain Falconer was twisting his body, trying to move his head.. Words, clear and disembodied, issued from his wan lips. He said, "No, no, no!"

Dr. Vanzart said crossly, "We're doing him no good! Out we go!"

Mr. Bibbs nodded. "Sad, isn't it? He's living over again that painful moment when he was struck down!"

MR. RYECROFT followed in the procession, back to the office. Mr. Bibbs poured drinks, but the little schoolteacher, whose draft of brandy was suddenly coming into its own, declined politely, adding a few solemn comments on the virtues of abstinence. Mr. Bibbs and the doctor, however, seemed unimpressed. Dr. Vanzart lighted a cigar, then settled back at his ease in a comfortable chair; he studied Mr. Ryecroft for a moment, said pleasantly, "I've been wondering about you. Who are you and how did you do it?"

Mr. Ryecroft asked helpfully, "How did I do what, sir?"

"Escape from the Indians. It must be an interesting story. No civilized man ever pieced together that homespun coat."

Mr. Bibbs smiled leniently. "Perhaps you'd better be a little gentler in your speech, Doctor. Mr. Ryecroft appears to be a guest of the house and we always make it a policy to—"

"I feel no offense," Mr. Ryecroft insisted. "I like to see a man have his joke. However, Mr. Bibbs, I'll have to ask you to be less brusque in your speech to the doctor. As a tavern proprietor I always make it a policy—"

"Tavern owner?" Mr. Azarias Bibbs looked startled. "What tavern do you own?"

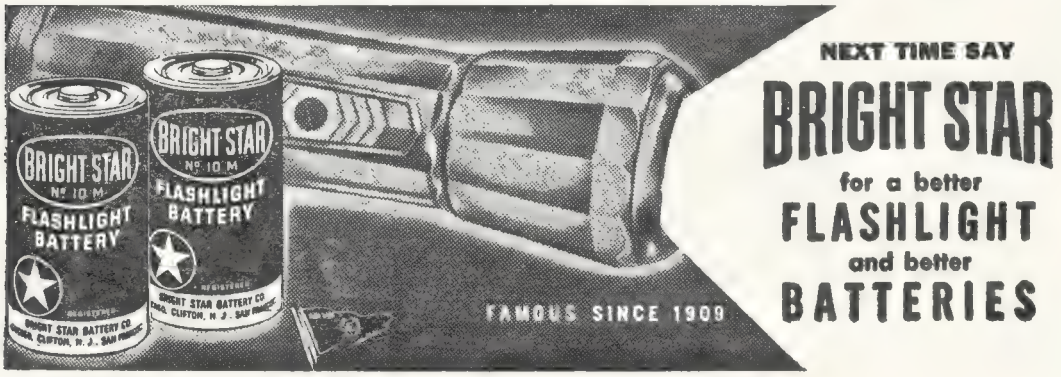
Mr. Ryecroft was becoming annoyed. "This one, of course. The Red Buck. As I said before, I'm John Ryecroft. Don't you recall? I bought it from you for one hundred and fifty dollars."

Mr. Bibbs filled a churchwarden, struck flame to its small bowl. "I remember you now. For goodness sakes, you don't mean to say that you're under the impression you bought *this* establishment for a paltry one-fifty?"

Dr. Vanzart said courteously, "Mayhap I best be getting along." He made no move to depart, however.

"Sit where you are, Doctor," Mr. Bibbs said. "You can act as a witness to this fiasco. I do like witnesses." He puffed amiably on his clay pipe. "You, Mr. Ryecroft, bought the other Red Buck, the original Red Buck. You'll have to change its name, of course; I can't have you running in competition. I was glad to get rid of it, it was a tax burden. Now if you'll just glance at your papers of ownership, you'll observe that the building you purchased is on Stable Street, across from the basin. The description of the property, and its location, are most explicit. It's a bit, *ah-hah-ah*, rundown at present. I doubt if you'll care to spend the night there until you've fixed it up a bit. Now, I'd be delighted to offer you accommodations here, at the customary rates, until you—"

Words, words, words. The fog of brandy cleared from his brain and in that instant of clarity Mr. Ryecroft knew that he'd been robbed of his life savings. Not at musket point, not with a bludgeon across the temple, but by Captain Falconer's false speech that evening in Wolf Scalp, by deliberately deceptive letters, by a



worthless rag-paper deed. Robbed by a network of sly, thieving words.

He had eight coins tied in the corner of his handkerchief; five British guineas, a French five-franc piece, and two small Cuban coins—money given to him by backwoods' fathers as tuition for their children. He took out his handkerchief, disengaged the five-franc piece, laid it carefully on the arm of Mr. Bibbs' chair. "In the barman's absence, I had a dram of Nantz brandy on the way in, sir," he said calmly. "I like to pay my debts. Good evening, gentlemen."

His eyes level and expressionless, he bowed stiffly, with old fashioned austerity, and left the room. His leg was bothering him a bit; that wound he'd received seventeen years before when he'd walked two hundred miles and back, from the Ohio River to the Lake, to stand with Harrison against the Shawnee at the Thames. He picked up his portmanteau in the bar-parlor, nodded to the barman, and stepped out into the hall.

It was then he got the impulse to look once more upon the wounded captain. He strode quickly and silently down the corridor, carefully opened the door and entered.

The captain lay on his back, his mouth agape, his eyes staring at the ceiling. The casement window had blown ajar, and Mr. Ryecroft, guarding the injured man from the damp night air, shut it and drew the bolt. He moved rapidly to the bed and gazed down upon the supine figure. It lay bootless, but wearing coat and breeches—as Mr. Bibbs had brought the wounded man in from the courtyard; the lapels of the coat were turned back and the shirtfront had been sheared away so that Dr. Vanzart might operate. One pocket of the coat was rumpled uncomfortably under the captain's ribs and Mr. Ryecroft attempted to rearrange it. Through the fabric of the cloth the schoolmaster's fingertips felt a weight of cold, slablike metal. Amazed, he withdrew the object.

It was an ax-head. And the captain's opposite pocket contained a duplicate. Fine new ax-heads, of a design unfamiliar to Mr. Ryecroft who knew ax-heads. Why would a gentleman be carrying an ax-head in the pocket of his dresscoat? And two ax-heads to boot! Two ax-heads was like two wives, unnatural, extravagant, and altogether nonsensical.

The captain appeared asleep, asleep with his eyes open.

Something bothered Mr. Ryecroft, some little evasive thing, and then he placed it. The color scheme was wrong, the color scheme beneath the disc of lamplight. Before it had been blue ticking through the open pillow slip, red blood-stain on the coverlet, the white teeth of the captain. Now it was simply red and white. There was no blue ticking. The ticking was on the far side now: the pillow beneath the captain's head had been moved, had been reversed.

Mr. Roycroft polished the new ax-head on his coat cuff, held it over the captain's open mouth. The cold metal retained its sheen; there was no hint of cloudy moisture.

Captain Falconer was dead.

MR. RYECROFT left the room, and the inn, and started out down Main Street in search of the other Red Buck Inn, on Stable Street. A lonesome constable beneath a misty streetlight in oilskins and scarf and dripping hide hat, directed him. He did more than direct him, he warned him. This was the spring of the year. The boats were moving south. Stable Street was a short block from the canal basin. The neighborhood was no place for gentlemen unless they came in pairs. Moreover, someone was certainly pranking someone, for the building referred to was a ramshackle rat-hole and hadn't been inhabited for a decade. If the gentleman was simply without funds, and looking for a dry place to sleep, the constable had an extra bed which he was glad to offer. If the gentleman would leave him some small pledge, of course, such as a ring, or watch, or snuffbox.

Mr. Ryecroft tipped his hat, said he thought he could make out very well, thank you.

He'd had about all he could take of Dandridge and its warm-hearted citizenry. This last touch of avarice was the straw that broke the camel's back.

He retraced a half block or so, came to a printing office which he had previously passed. A faint light was burning within; he pressed down the latch, a little bell tinkled, and he stepped inside.

It was a dingy room, much like a cave. An unshaven, pot-bellied man was fussing over a dilapidated Ramage press, inking the balls, setting type. Mr. Ryecroft asked, "This a newspaper, sir?"

"Yep. The Dandridge *Intelligencer*. We come out early tomorrow morning. I'm setting up a late item about a gentleman, Captain Dandridge, who got himself shot, but is recovering. What can I do for you?"

Mr. Ryecroft laid out one of his precious guineas. "I want to advertise for a run-away. An indented boy, you know. How do I go about it?"

"They all use the same form. Reward four cents. Take him up and return him. No thanks. His description and your address."

"Well, I'll offer six cents reward. He's as big as a man, big chest, blue eyes. Broad-brimmed hat, leather apron. Carries a cobbler's knife. Usually hides just out of town somewhere in the common. The boy-takers had better exercise caution, however. He might prove dangerous."

"They'll take him all right, if they find him. Boy-takers are bad medicine themselves and six cents is six cents. What's your address?"

Mr. Ryecroft told him. The printer sounded the guinea, counted out a stack of banknotes and small cash in change, bade Mr. Roycroft a pleasant evening.

It was nearing midnight when John Ryecroft turned down Stable Street, counting off doorsteps as he progressed, and came to the building he had bought and which had been described to him as a flourishing tavern. It stood before him, black in the swirling mist, and despite the obscurity of its outline he could sense its ancient lassitude. Vaguely he made out small, high shutters rotting from their hinges, low eaves, moss-grown, and the finger of a crumbling chimney. He climbed three shallow stone steps, pushed open the sagging door. The

The cold metal retained its sheen; there was no hint of cloudy moisture. Captain Falconer was dead.

foul odor of long imprisoned air engulfed him. He shut the door with his heel and lighted a candle-end.

Dust lay like velvet nap across the broad-planked floor and rubbish lay in mounds in the corners of the bare rooms. Room after room, dazed with fatigue, he made a weary survey. This was the end of his journey. On this he'd pinned his childish dreams. For this he'd worked long and hard and honestly. For this he'd laid aside his schoolmaster's rod, his Virgil, his rule of-three, and his chalk and slate. Trickery and ruin was his compensation. There was no such maxim in his copybooks: Trickery and Ruin is Honesty's Reward.

He sat down on the hard floor and took off his shoes; he wrapped the quilt from his portmanteau about his aching legs, stretched out full-length and tried to go to sleep. The drizzle outside had turned into hard, lashing pebbles of rain and he could hear them skitter against the window pane. He thought a little about Dr. Vanzart, and a little about Mr. Azarias Bibbs—and a great deal about Captain Falconer. He thought about that pillow, reversed beneath Captain Falconer's head.

He knew in his heart, as well as he knew the rules of calculus, that Captain Falconer had been twice attacked, and once murdered. That his vicious assailant, failing to kill his prey by gunshot in the dark, had returned to finish his work, had crept upon his victim as he lay wounded on his bed, and smothered him with his pillow. Out comes the pillow, over the captain's face, and back again under his head, this time reversed. Silently, no confusion, no new wounds.

Why?

The captain had not been slain because of his association with Mr. Ryecroft's hundred and fifty-dollar swindle; the money was too petty, for one thing, and the deal, while essentially fraudulent, was certainly perfectly legal. If Mr. Bibbs was a man of wealth, a man of many profitable enterprises—and Mr. Ryecroft believed he was—then his sly unloading of a bit of liability was simply a good, but minor business move according to his lights. In no way could it be construed as a motive for murdering his agent.

But anyway you looked at it, two things were apparent. First, Captain Falconer had been done to death. Second, Mr. Ryecroft had a horror of being involved in unpleasant affairs, a penchant for problems, and, he admitted placidly to himself, a growing anger against the destiny which was ensnarling him.

Outside, the shutters banged and thumped. The rain was mounting rapidly into a gale and water whipped the old building with the shriek of ripped cloth. Gradually, Mr. Ryecroft realized that the floor was dry. This meant that the roof was still sound. He wondered about the fireplace flues. His father had often said that any house with a good roof and a good flue was a good house. All at once Mr. Roycroft felt better. He fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

BULLETS FOR MR. RYECROFT

MR. RYECROFT awoke about seven. The storm had blown itself out during the night and moted sunlight poured through the window in fan-like rays, splashing the rubbled floor with brilliant orange-golden blossoms. Despite his better judgment, the little schoolmaster felt a sense of exhilaration. In a surge of elation, and in the traditional manner of a newly vested property owner, he sauntered out the door, onto the doorstep, to take note of his surroundings and appraise his neighbors.

It was a beautiful spring morning, blue and gold, without a cloud in the sky. With a mild and pleasurable shock, he observed that his environs were not as bad as he'd expected. Not good, but not too bad either. He was flanked on the left by a not too disreputable coffee house and on the right by a nine-pin alley. These were each favorable adjuncts to an inn. In his block, he observed, the shops were modest, but, then, modesty was a virtue. The street was built up on but one side; facing him, at his curb, was an old cobblestone highway, but antiquity, too, was a virtue of sorts. Across the wide spread of cobbles were the rear ends of warehouses and commission houses; these, he supposed, faced the canal which the constable had told him was but a short block away. Clamor and confusion, subdued but distinct, coming from that direction appeared to substantiate this.

He descended his steps, walked to the curb, and turned to get his first view of The Ryecroft House. That was what he was going to name it; not particularly novel, but fairly pointed. He winced. It was pretty bad, you couldn't get away from admitting it. Shutters askew and about to drop to earth like wounded ducks, birds' nests in the water spout, its face streaked and grimy from neglect and weather, it didn't offer much promise. Three passersby, noticing his intense concern, paused, each in turn, to inform him that he had the wrong address, that the building was abandoned.

He went inside and began, room by room, the onerous task of cleaning up. As he worked he observed that the place was sturdily built, heavy oaken floors and strong, eight-inch ceiling timbers of blue ash. He carried the rubbish through the back door to the tavern's old flagged stable-court and burned it. He was thus engaged when the two clock salesmen rounded

"These here are wunnerful clocks," the red-haired man said unctuously. "Five dollars apiece."

the corner of the building and approached him.

He didn't recognize them as merchants at first, even when he noticed that each had a clock under his arm. They looked more like the waterfront ruffians he'd seen before the ginhouses in Cincinnati. They wore battered, faded beavers, which they doffed with a sort a crablike servility as they advanced; they were stubble-chinned and oily-eyed, with calloused hands and patched boots. One of them, the smaller, was dressed in a tattered, ankle-length surtout. The other appeared to be the leader of the team; he wore a soiled crimson roundabout and his red hair fell in greasy ringlets down the nape of his bull-like neck. He said ingratiatingly, "A beautiful mornin', an' bless you, sir. Could I have a minute o' your time, sir?"

Mr. Ryecroft nodded. "Certainly."

"Are you movin' in?" the red-haired man asked. "Or are you jest a-laborin' fer somebuddy else? We seen you cleanin' up an'—"

"I am moving in. I own this property." Mr. Ryecroft stepped back out of the smoke of the bonfire. "I hope, in due time, to open a hotel here—"

The red-haired man turned to his companion. "You hear the gent'man, Rodney?"

The man in the ankle-length overcoat grinned. "I hear him, Fye."

The red-haired man said unctuously, "Me an' him's sellin' clocks. We figgered on placin' one with you but if you're goin' to run a hotel mebbe you could use three or four. How about it? These here are wunnerful clocks. They come over the mountains by wagon from the seacoast. Five dollars apiece."

They were fine clocks, all right. Mr. Ryecroft said, "But they're worth at least thirty dollars!"

"That's what I'm tellin' you. It's a bargain!" Fye took a big breath. "Yessir, you don't often see—"

There was a crash. A clock had slipped from Rodney's grasp and lay broken on the flagstones. He said, nettled, "Dang it, that's the fourth I busted since we got 'em in!" Fye picked up the case, tossed it on the bonfire where it crackled merrily.

Mr. Roycroft looked horrified. "Why destroy it? It can be repaired."

"The man that made 'em," the red-haired man explained, "lives t'other side of the Western Ocean. Ain't hardly worth the time an' trouble. Well, what do you say?"

Mr. Ryecroft blinked. He suddenly became aware of an interesting fact. He'd been seeing clocks of this same model everywhere ever since he'd arrived in town. There'd been one on the back bar of the Red Buck tavern and one in Mr. Bibbs' office; there'd been one on the desk at the *Intelligencer;* he'd seen at least three in as many shop windows. He said gravely, "I'd love to own a clock, such as these you're selling. However, at the present moment I'm in a rather stringent situation financially. Do you extend credit? I see by your faces that the idea is abhorrent to you. Maybe if you'd return in a year or so—"

The red-haired man said, "Come on, Rodney. We'll work Front Street."

When laborers from the warehouse across the cobbled street began appearing on the little strip of lawn with lunch baskets and pitchers of beer, Mr. Roycroft knew that it was noon. He paused and looked about him with skeptical satisfaction; his building, he decided, was finally started on its long path to cleanliness. He felt weak and sick, and suddenly he remembered that he hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours.

At a nearby huckster-shop he bought a length of sausage, some tea, and a few biscuits. He also bought a twist of tobacco for a guest he was expecting, and a quarter-penny's worth of molasses candy for himself; he felt he'd earned it. Here, too, he got tar, some slab-soap made from home leached ashes, and a faggot broom. He left an order for a keg of brined pork, a sack of meal, and a jug of sorghum to be delivered; these were staples, and cheap, and he anticipated a siege of hardship.

HE was in his kitchen, browning the sausage on the hearth, and brewing tea, when he heard the hammering of a staff on his door panel. He went forward through the house to receive his visitors. Three men passed across his threshold—and a boy. The men walked in file formation so that the boy was completely surrounded by them. And the boy was the lad whom Ryecroft had met the night before on the common, the boy with the broad-brimmed hat and leather apron. Now, with a bruise on his temple and a cut on his cheek he looked not only like an ape, but like a raging ape. Three men, and a boy, and a dog. Mr. Ryecroft apologized for having no furniture.

The men were indescribably dirty; their misfit clothes were hand-me-downs and their faces were harsh and cruel. One of them carried a heavy old flintlock musket with a worm-eaten stock. The men were mangy and lazy moving—but the little dog, a black and white creature scarcely eight inches high, scampered and sniffed, scrabbling here and there in constant beetle-like activity. The man with the musket said, "Here's the boy the *Intelligencer* said you wanted taken up. He's your lad, isn't he?"

Mr. Ryecroft nodded.

The boy said dully, "I should've cut yore throat when I had the chance. I'm not yore apprentice, and you know it."

The man with the musket smiled. "They always do the same thing. First they threaten their master, then they swear to high heaven they never seen him afore. I know. I've took dozens of 'em. Me an' Phoebe"—he shoved a thumb toward the prancing little dog—"she's the one that does it. She can smell a 'dented boy farther'n you can smell a bar'l o' whiskey mash. Now if you'll jest show me your papers o' indenture, an' pay me my six cents, I'll be gittin' along."

"I'm a newcomer to town," Mr. Ryecroft announced. He looked embarrassed. "It's very strange but my covenant of indenture disappeared about the same time that—"

The men grinned. "They do that, too," the leader said. "They figger if they can take that little paper along an' burn it up, all hell can't stop 'em. Well, they're wrong. Me an' my musket an' Phoebe can stop 'em. You got six cents for me or not?"

Mr. Ryecroft paid the money. A man with a locust staff said helpfully, "He's a mean one, mister. Maybe I'd better stay around while you chastise him. It'll cost you an extra cent."

Mr. Ryecroft shook his head.

The men filed out of the door, the little dog sniffing and weaving at their heels.

The boy stared fixedly at the little schoolteacher. Mr. Ryecroft returned the gaze tranquilly; he produced a few crumpled banknotes from his critically dwindling supply, said calmly, "Get yourself some decent clothes. Shirt, pantaloons and, for goodness sakes, shoes. Then hurry back. Dinner's about ready."

Scornfully, the boy took the money. Mr. Ryecroft watched him disappear down the street.

The sausage became over-browned and Mr. Ryecroft set it to one side on the hearthstones. The sight of the biscuits drove him almost frantic with hunger but he dismissed them from his mind by speculating upon just how the Egyptians had built their pyramids. The tea got chilly; he piled ashes up around the pot, sat on his heels and waited. It was three hours before the boy returned.

WHEN he stepped into the room, Mr. Ryecroft hardly recognized him. Only by his height, and brawny forearms, did he place him. He was clean. Scrubbed. His leather apron was gone and he wore sturdy, second-hand garments, tough cotton shirt, walnut-dyed jeans, thick-soled brogans. His cheeks were crisscrossed with tiny cuts. Mr. Ryecroft asked solicitously, "Been having trouble?"

"Plenty. I washed at the watering trough at the livery stable an' shaved with a busted bottle."

"You know, I had the feeling that you might not return."

"I had that feelin' myself. I been sittin' on the embankment for two hours, tryin' to make up my mind."

Mr. Ryecroft made no answer. He served the boy a major portion of the food. They ate in silence. When the tea was finished, Mr. Ryecroft began to talk. Softly and calmly, without self-pity, he related his entire misadventure. The boy listened intently.

"I was considerably distressed," he concluded amiably. "And then my misery somehow turned into, I'm ashamed to say, anger. And anger into resolution. After all I have a building, such as it is, and many men have started with less. The forces of evil that appear to oppress me are man-made; I see no reason why they can't be justly overcome. While I'm not particularly brilliant, I'm fairly diligent. Shall I go on?"

The boy said nothing. Mr. Ryecroft amplified, "After I talked with you last night, out on the common, it occurred to me that you were a runaway boy, possibly a cobbler's apprentice." The boys blue eyes hardened. Mr. Ryecroft continued mildly, "Now I hold no brief for bondage, in any form, legal or otherwise. For some unearthly reason you struck me as being very solid and dependable if properly approached. I'm aware, of course, that these traits have so far remained dormant in you. I'll take a chance. I've summoned you here to offer you a proposition. I'm determined to establish my inn. I need physical and moral support. I'm prepared to offer you a good name, freedom from bondage, and a junior partnership in the business if you care to enter into my misfortune with me." He added diffidently, "That's about all, I guess."

The boy said slowly, "So you pay six cents reward—an' bring in a junior partner at the point of a gun."

"It was the only way to do it, the only way to obliterate your outstanding indenture. To claim you as my own. Now you have a new identity. What is your name, by the way?"

"They call me Hugger O'Brien. My real name's Gillespie Espy."

"Gillespie Esp—" Mr. Ryecroft winced. "We'll change that right now. Henceforth, for reasons of security and euphony, you shall be known as, er, Billy—for my dear departed father—and Hackett for my dear departed mother. Billy Hackett." Mr. Ryecroft's mouth tightened. "You'd better live up to it. Do you accept my offer, Billy?"

"Why not? You take a chance on me, I'll take a chance on you."

Mr. Ryecroft got up, glanced casually at the little row of schoolbooks on the chimney shelf. "Can you read?"

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"A little, sir."

"Call me John, Billy. What is a debtor, a creditor, a promissory note, and a bill of exchange?"

"I never—"

"Well, don't feel too badly about it. You're just a boy, Billy. I didn't know myself until I'd read all about them in that blue book yonder. The volume next to it is an ancient history, then a volume on Roman law. The big morocco edition is primary and advanced arithmetic—but you'll never need to know anything about that, you're just the junior partner." Mr. Ryecroft picked up his hat. "I'll be gone most of the afternoon. If the spirit moves you, you might scrub a floor or two with lye, and seal the window sills with that tar there."

"Where you goin'?"

"In a manner of speaking, we're not exactly solvent. There's a rather perilous liability against us. I, the senior partner, am inadvertently involved in a potentially dangerous situation. I'm referring to the strange fate of Captain Falconer. I thought perhaps it might be a good idea if I devoted the afternon to clarifying that somewhat bewildering incident. Do you see anything unusual in the story as I related it to you?"

"It's a felony. The captain was shot, an' then smothered. That's a felony, I think."

"I'm not alluding to its legality, I'm referring to its logic. I can't bring myself to believe it happened as Mr. Azarias Bibbs recounted it. He said the captain heard a barking dog in the courtyard, seized a dueling pistol and ran out into the night. Now a dueling pistol is an extremely sacred thing, and the captain, as a military man, must have felt this deeply. He certainly wouldn't have used a dueling pistol, his or anyone else's, to exterminate a canine. I'm curious about this obvious falsity. I think I'll take a little walk and ask a few questions."

Billy Hackett stared into the curled, dying embers of the fireplace. Finally he cleared his throat. "I ain't been around Dandridge long but one thing I lernt already. This Azarias Bibbs owns the town, lock, stock, an' bar'l. He could cause a feller a heap o' grief if he took the notion. Mebbe I'd best stroll along with you, John."

"I'll be quite all right," Mr. Roycroft said stiffly. He stepped out into the sunlight and closed the kitchen door behind him. He hadn't been called John since he'd paid a circuit rider four dollars to bury his father thirty-odd years ago. Somehow, it gave him strength.

His intended destination was the elegant Red Buck Inn, and Mr. Bibbs. Two things, it appeared to him, could stand a bit of explaining: the pistol business, and Captain Falconer's last words. Why had Captain Falconer, on his deathbed, stared at Bibbs and said, *"No! No!"*? Dr. Vanzart had taken it to mean that the captain was re-living the moment of his attack, but Mr. Ryecroft was unsatisfied with this explanation.

Being in no particular hurry, and mighty interested in just what a canal town looked like, he crossed the cobblestones, circled the gaunt warehouses, and came out into that section of Dandridge known as the basin.

Almost instantly he was plunged into a bedlam of noise and activity.

HERE a small river ran through the town. With the building of the canal a few years previously, the river bed had been dredged and deepened, and widened, forming a small tidy basin where boats were now berthed. A broad avenue paved with limestone blocks edged the pool on each side, running from the buttressed embankment back to a façade of motley waterfront shops, chandleries and ginhouses. Some of the shops were open-fronted, displaying on rough board counters whiskey, yardgoods, cutlery and small ironware. Crude signs everywhere said, *Good by Butler County—Hello New Orleans; Cincinnati, Natchez, and Southward Ho!; Mississippi River—Here We Come!*

The small paved plaza was a jumble of horses, and boats, and milling humans. The boats were new and trim, and painted every color from drab Spanish brown to canary yellow. A crowd was gathered about a long pine canoe which had just finished an eight-day trip of seven hundred miles from Jefferson County, Pennsylvania, down the Alleghany, down the Ohio, and up the canal to Dandridge, with a load of butter crocks and jugs. Now she was loading pork and flour, bound for New Orleans or bust. There were rafts and lumber boats, passenger-and-freight packets. Mr. Ryecroft saw three fine, sleek packets, bright in blue paint, bearing scrolled letters reading, *Merchants and Agrarians Line, A. Bibbs.* Drays and carts and sledges, pulled by sweating horses, crowded and wheeled and backed. Drivers cursing and laughing, cutting the street in ceaseless movement and clamor. Farmer-boatmen with quid in their cheeks, in knotty homespun, jostled suave salesmen-merchants from the transmontane coastal cities as meal and meat and spirits were loaded, and priceless manufactured eastern elegancies unloaded.

Everyone was hysterical with the strain of lifting, and hauling, and shouting. The spring rush was on. The boats were moving. The boats were moving south.

Even Mr. Ryecroft, standing indolently in the golden sunshine, exerting himself not at all, was sweating and tense.

A fat man in a sailcloth booth was doing some sort of a brisk business with a group of gawking rustics. Mr. Ryecroft, pushing his way along the sidewalk through the throng, was about to

turn about and retrace his steps, when he observed the sign. Spick and span in red-and-black paint, it hung before a dingy stuccoed shop, wedged between an open-air forge and a grocery. It said,

Mr. Bibbs
Sundries
Sweets — Herbs — Ink

A little flabbergasted at so much evidence of omnipresence and mercantile versatility, Mr. Ryecroft opened the door and wandered in. He found himself in a small room, walled and floored in pine; a curtain divided the room, and apparently the section behind the curtain was devoted to a storeroom, or lodging. All about him, on a short counter, and on wall shelves, were canisters and bottles of herbs, dill, marjoram, balm, cowhage, cummin, Peruvian bark, camomile; in neat rows were paper rolls of boiled sweets, quills, foolscap, pins, buttons, ink. There was the pleasant fragrance of mint in the air as a man behind the counter mashed pennyroyal leaves in a marble mortar with a small marble pestle. He said, "And how can I be of service to you, sir?"

He was a slender man, possibly in his middle thirties, with a long-jawed, morose face. He wore a close-bodied green coat with a slit tail, and pantaloons of green cazinett; his garments, once fine, were now slovenly and shabby through neglect. There was a melancholy, crow-like slump to his shoulders and his eyes, behind steel-rimmed spectacles, were like moist black snails lost in caverns of wrinkled skin. Mr. Ryecroft noted the inkspot on his quill-finger and put him down as a scholar; certainly the requirements of this little shop demanded a minimum of clerkship. Mr. Ryecroft asked politely, "And how is Mr. Bibbs this morning?"

"He's bursting with health and vigor. He's home sick in bed. Why?"

Mr. Ryecroft cleared his throat. "Would you say that again, sir? I don't quite seem to—"

"I am Mr. Bibbs, Mr. Bagley Bibbs. I am bursting with health and vigor. The other party, to whom you refer, is at home, critically ill, they tell me. There are two of us, Azarias and Bagley, A and B, and beyond the accidental fact that Azarias happens to be my father, we are completely unrelated. He considers me an academic wastrel, and I consider him an unmitigated rascal and a blot on my otherwise passable lineage. However, don't repeat that in courtsquare or they'll think you a madman. He seems to have the whole countryside completely befuddled."

"You feel that way about him, and yet you live with him?"

"I don't live with him, haven't since I was old enough to scratch for myself. He stays in his big old house out at the edge of town on Race Street, I quarter myself here back of my store."

The man behind the counter said, "And how can I be of service to you, sir?"

Mr. Ryecroft was shocked. "Despite what you say, young man, if your father is ill you belong at his bedside!"

Bagley Bibbs nodded. "I know it. In fact, I've just returned from paying a sick call. However, we get so badly on each other's nerves that I felt my presence was exciting him. I left. When I got home and read his note I knew he wasn't merely sick—he's crazy!"

Mr. Ryecroft looked invitingly interested. Bagley Bibbs produced a paper twice folded, and originally sealed with red wax. "He had this under his pillow. Gave it to me as I departed. Said he'd been trying to get it to me. Such nonsense!" Mr. Ryecroft leaned forward, peered. Shaded copperplate script said,

Dear Bagley:
I am the pathetic victim of Treason! Azarias Bibbs, Humanity's Friend, the victim of Treason! Shades of Henry VIII!
Your respectful Servant & Father
Azarias Bibbs
The Year of Our Lord 1531
What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
What wheels? racks? fires? What flaying? boiling in leads or oils?

Bagley tossed the paper under the counter. "That's his writing. The quotation about the torments is from Shakespeare. Paulina thus speaks to the Lords in *The Winter's Tale*, Act Three, Scene Two. But what's this Henry VIII business? Goodness knows he's powerful enough locally but he's no sovereign to cry treason! You know what's behind this, don't you? Well, last night an underling of his, a member of his royal household, a Captain Falconer, stopped a bullet and died. It appears to have shocked my father into a condition of apoplexy."

Mr. Ryecroft said kindly, "You speak in mockery, but I perceive that your hand trembles. Blood is thicker than water. Return to your father's house, sir, and—"

"That I couldn't do. Even if he would have it. I disapprove of his ethics. No house is big enough for both of us."

"In that case," Mr. Ryecroft answered sadly, "tell me one thing. What is a criosphinx?"

Mr. Bagley Bibbs' dolorous face showed a spark of life. "Why, a criosphinx is a ram-headed sphinx. I'm curious as to what prompted your question. You're about the only person in town who ever heard of a—"

Mr. Ryecroft asked, "Was your mother's name Dinsmore before she married?"

"No. It was Smith." Bagley Bibbs flushed. "What is this all about?"

"Who in your family was named Dinsmore, or don't you recall?"

"Of course I recall. I happen to be very interested in genealogy. There are no Dinsmores in my bloodline. Who are you anyway, and what do you want?" Mr. Bagley's tone became crisp. "Is this a rig, sir?"

Mr. Ryecroft looked vague, doffed his hat, and mumbled words of farewell. Mr. Bagley went back to his mortar and pestle.

THE hour was nearing sunset, and the sun was hanging low over the white chimney-pots, when Mr. Ryecroft stepped from the little shop and sidled his way through the drays and carts and booths, headed for Main Street. Activity in the basin, he observed, had not let up one whit; the clamor was deafening and the movement hither and yon of so many men and animals in such a small space was a bit confusing to his backwoods eyes.

He noticed the sailcloth stall; there was a lull in business now, and the fat man was arranging beads and trinkets and a stack of pink-paper pamphlets on a barrelhead before him. He was a big man, not only fat but powerful, and slovenly. His sweating face was brown and weathered and wrinkled, and his black hair fell to his collar wild and glossy, without benefit of bear grease or pomatum. He leaned forward as Mr. Ryecroft passed, thrust one of his pink pamphlets into the schoolteacher's hand. Mr. Ryecroft glanced at it. It said, *THE PILOT'S GUIDE, Being a Chart and Handbook of Currents, Sandbars, Tides, Back-Waters, and Sink Holes of the Ohio, Wabash, and Mississippi Rivers, with an Appendix on Spanish and French Customs, and a Glossary of Monetary Rates of Exchange, by Zopkan Fye, Master Pilot.*

Instantly, the fat man started an urgent, intimate monologue. "Goin' down-river, eh? Down into Ole New Orleans country. Do you know about the sink-holes? Do you know about the tides? Everything's in the little book, there. Are you prepared for Indians? Trinkets will pacify 'em. Trinkets an' beads. Look here. Look what I've got for sale, sir! Just the thing for a down-river trip!"

Mr. Ryecroft open the booklet, read a passage which began, *Should you be attacked by a ferocious Nubian lion then you must . . .*

He closed the pamphlet, returned it to its owner, said, "Fiddle-faddle. I'm not going to New Orleans and if I were I wouldn't buy one of these deceptions! Nubian lions! Sink-holes! Tides! Who is the dunce who wrote this absurd—"

"I am," the fat man said modestly. "I am Zopkan Fye. An' I think you'll find it a very good book, considerin' the fack I never been out o' Dandridge in my life. I copied 'er from a ole history of the Nile and put in a touch or two of gossip. I don't believe I know you, do I?"

Mr. Ryecroft introduced himself. "I met a brother of yours this morning," he volunteered. "Crimson roundabout and red hair. Tried to sell me a clock."

"Now did he?" The fat man frowned. "That ain't my brother. That's Striker Fye, a cousin twice removed. An' they can remove him once more as far as I'm concerned! He's one of the red-haired Fyes, they're all natcheral thieves. I'm a black-haired Fye, myself. He used to be a striker for a carriagesmith but couldn't hold his job. Now he's got a little store back on Elm Street, they tell me. When I was a boy—"

A man appeared at Mr. Ryecroft's side. He was a city man, suave and polished, with gleaming shoe-tips and splendidly tailored clothes. There was a ruby ring on his little finger and he smelled of perfumes and barber lotions. He stared a hard moment at Mr. Ryecroft and Zopkan Fye, biting his underlip with white teeth, glowering all the while. Finally he asked frigidly, "Bumpkins, where might I find the sheriff?"

Zopkan Fye swept the street with his pale eyes. "He's around somewhere. Just holler out an' he'll come. He's allus around somewhere, watching 'em load an' unload the boats."

Mr. Ryecroft asked sympathetically, "You in trouble, sir?"

"Certainly I'm in trouble."

"Your name Dinsmore, sir?" Mr. Ryecroft smiled diffidently.

"No. And stop asking those idiotic questions." The city man launched into a stormy tale of misery. "Whatever induced me to leave the civilization of the Atlantic coast and come back into this barbarous hinterland! I've endured nothing but incivility since I crossed the mountains, and now this! Calamity! Ruin!"

Mr. Ryecroft nodded, said, "I have an inn. It isn't much. But if you are without funds I'd like to offer you my meager roof until—"

"I'm not without funds, you fool. I could buy and sell you where you stand. It's those confounded shipping cases! Five case of Sheffield ax-heads, two imported brass hinges, two door locks, eight French china. Back here in the wilderness they're worth their weight in gold. High quality stuff, all of it. I'm a salesman-merchant. Potter's my name. I've been accompanying my merchandise. From Boston it came, down the river to Cincinnati. Supposed to change at Cincinnati for Louisville. Got knocked on the head on the waterfront in Cincinnati, came to and found things at sixes and sevens. Merchandise didn't get trans-shipped. Had simply vanished. Dockside loafer said he'd seen crates such as I described moved north along the canal. Did either of you see—"

"I saw nothing," Mr. Ryecroft declared.

Mr. Fye chimed in. "Me neither, I'm just a bumpkin."

Potter tilted back his hat, blew out his breath. "I'll catch a packet north out of here. They must have gone north. I don't suppose the sheriff could be of much help. I'll run them down myself." He picked up his carpet traveling bag and scurried into the throng.

Zopkan Fye said thoughtfully, "He was right. The sheriff wouldn't be of no help there. I know. I'm the sheriff."

Mr. Ryecroft was staring at his coat sleeve. A little wisp of homespun stuck out like a tiny hairy tuft, as though he'd caught it on a nail. But he'd caught it on no nail. Of that he was sure. A moment ago there'd been no rip or rent of any kind. As though he'd caught it on a nail, yes, or as though someone had fired at him with a pistol. A dueling pistol, for instance. A small-bored pistol which would lose its tiny lethal cough in this bedlam of shouts and cries, in this pandemonium of cracking bull whips and banging, thumping draying.

He looked cautiously about him. Here was too much for the eye to encompass. A small pistol could be held beneath such a baker's apron as the one yonder, or beneath the flounces of a dress such as that girl was wearing, or held secretly in the folds of a traveling shawl such as that old man was clutching about his shoulders. . .

A bullet hole in his sleeve and too many peo-

ple, too much noise. How different from stalking the lurking Shawnee with Harrison.

Sheriff Zopkan Fye was talking. ". . . as I was saying, when I was a boy, things was different. My daddy was a pack horse captain and he used to bring supplies in to the old fort, forty horses to the train, all the way from hell an' gone. I don't recall them days because I wasn't borned yet an' that hampers a feller's memory. The ole fort stood where the *Red Buck Inn* stands now, Mr. Bibbs' *Red Buck Inn*. Daddy brought in meal and pig-meat an' they stored it in the cellar alongside the powder an' shot."

Mr. Ryecroft asked gently, "Did you hear a pistol go off?"

"I'm hearin' 'em go off all the time. That's what I git for bein' sheriff. Yessirree, corn meal an' pig-meat they brought in in them days. No Eastern elegancies like brass hinges an' Sheffield ax-blades. Tell me, friend, how's a farmer, pity the pore cuss, goin' to pay the price of a ax-head, come clean across the water, on shelled corn that's selling at ten cents a bushel?"

Mr. Bibbs laid down his pen. A spasm of distress crossed his face. "I'm about to die. And who cares? An old man, all alone, with no friends. Now that dear Captain Falconer's gone, I'm completely deserted."

Mr. Ryecroft wet his finger, stuck the wisp of homespun back into its torn vent, said, "I'll be getting along, Sheriff Fye. Good day, sir."

CHAPTER IV

THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA

AT THE end of Race Street, fat buckeye trees fringed the town. Mr. Ryecroft found the rutted road funneling to a path, and the path to a trail; he followed it uphill, through underbrush and scrub, through sparse tall shellback hickory and tangled mulberry sprouts, and came out finally on a small knoll. The house sat squat and lethargic on the top of the knoll.

It was a house of brick and stone, not as large as he'd somehow expected, but showy and smug, and reeking with the patina of money, new money. It was E-shaped, and elegant, and faced downhill through a broad avenue of box elders toward the river which wound past the foot of the carefully trimmed lawn. The setting sun struck coral against its conical chimney tiles, glittered like new copper from its small square windows, and laid a pattern of long shadows

across its veranda, from porch pillars to front door. No smoke came from the chimneys and the glint of sun on the window panes was as the glint of light on the spectacles of a sleeping man.

Mr. Ryecroft took the narrow pebbled walk to the front porch, crossed the new flags, and dropped the knocker on its plate. There was no response. He knocked three times, and hearing nothing, entered. He had no scruples whatever about invading a private home. He feared calamity and, in the backwoods mode to which he was accustomed, considered it neighborly to investigate.

He found himself in a small reception hall. To his right was a staircase and to his left a narrower hall extended back toward the kitchen. There was a fine Flemish carpet beneath his feet and by his elbow was a seven-foot pier glass; he got a foreshortened view of the downstairs doors, observed that they were framed in mouldings of gilded plaster and considered this not only feminine but highly impractical. He cleared his throat, called out his presence, and started upstairs. Bagley Bibbs had said that his father was ill. That would mean he was in a bedroom.

There was furniture in the upstairs hall, a few chairs, a table or two with potted ferns, a clothes rack holding a plaid cape, an assortment of Mr. Bibbs' cast-off beaver hats, a pair of muddy hunting boots with a riding crop thrust into one of them. It ws as though their owner had departed this earth. There was no light here except for a faint diffusion which came from a tiny fanlight window of colored glass at the front of the corridor. Dusk was coming fast and while the house was not cold in the April evening, there was a growing dankness which told of a lack of fires, hearth fire and kitchen fire. It was the touch of fire, Mr. Ryecroft told himself, which turned a house into a home. This house was not precisely cold—it was just stillborn.

The schoolteacher found Azarias Bibbs in the master bedroom, propped up in bed with a heap of pillows, writing. A candelabrum with five candle-ends was on a taboret by the bedside; in the flickering light his flabby cheeks were flushed and sickly but his eyes were clear and shrewd. He was wearing a nightrobe of dirty Irish linen and a peaked nightcap; on his knees rested a lapboard with quill and ink and paper. Errors in his work, in the form of crumpled balls of paper, lay about the floor where he had tossed them.

He glanced at Mr. Ryecroft as he came through the door, said curtly, "You're just in time. I can use you. Sit down." His tone was that of a housekeeper addressing a coachman come for the grocery list.

Being a little tired, Mr. Ryecroft sat down.

The shades to the windows were drawn but in the candlelight Mr. Ryecroft caught the gleam of brocade and fine glazed furniture, and more gilt moulding. On the taboret by the candlelabrum were medicines and a carafe of water with a goblet. Mr. Ryecroft asked solicitously, "How are you feeling, sir?"

Mr. Bibbs laid down his pen. A spasm of distress passed across his lax face. "I'm about to die. And who cares?" His eyes flooded with misery. "An old man, all alone, with no friends. Now that dear Captain Falconer's gone, I'm completely deserted."

"I'm sure it was a great blow," Mr. Ryecroft declared.

"Words can't express my desolation. We buried him this morning. I gave the orders and paid the money and they buried him just as he would have wished."

"A grand and expensive funeral, I dare say."

"No, not exactly. A very modest one. That's the point. The captain was a modest and a humble man. He was dead set against extravagance. I bought him a small plot of ground and buried him in a cheap wooden coffin. A personal touch, you see, done just the way he'd have wanted—" Mr. Bibbs suddenly blinked. "I know you now, sir. You're the chawbacon fellow whom I sold my old inn to! The one who visited me last night just after the tragedy occurred. Well, bless my heart! I'm glad to see you."

"Thank you." Mr. Ryecroft bowed vaguely from a sitting position.

"How did you like the old inn?"

"Not any too pleased with it, I must admit."

"Unloaded it on anyone else yet?"

"No. I'm going to keep it. I'm beginning to like it."

"Nonsense. No one could like it. Hang around the waterfront, sir. The spring rush is on and the town's full of foolish money. You should get back twice your investment if you can talk fast and smooth. You may give me as a reference if you wish. I've got lawyers."

"Very kind of you, but I think I'll keep it." Mr. Ryecroft folded his hands. "I don't suppose they've caught the chap who pistoled the captain?"

"No, and they won't. Some transient, I'm afraid. The town's full of floaters."

"I've been wondering about something," Mr. Ryecroft said thoughtfully. "Last night, when Captain Falconer was on his bed, he looked at you and exclaimed, *'No, no, no!'* That was very puzzling, wasn't it?"

"It was very sad. I could hardly stand it. The captain was, in a sense, my business advisor. I've been thinking of going into a toll-bridge company. He'd been investigating it for me. He knew he was dying and he was trying to get his affairs all straightened out. He was advising me not to go into—"

"I see. He certainly was a loyal retainer, wasn't he? And another thing. According to the

facts as I got them, the captain grabbed up that dueling pistol and rushed into the hotel court, where he was done in. I had the opportunity of examining the weapon, and a beautiful little piece it is. It's beautifully engraved and on the butt is chased in silver a criosphinx and the motto *Animis opibusque parati.* The emblem and the motto both belong to the family of Dinsmore. I've been talking to your son and he says that you people have no Dinsmores in your bloodline. Now dueling pistols are rarely given away, or sold, so I am indeed curious about your acquisition of said weapon. I believe you said it was yours, didn't you?"

Mr. Bibbs said casually, "I bought it. I've got the bill of sale somewhere to prove it. Everything's perfectly legal. I liked it and I bought it." He added carelessly, "Never heard of these Dinsmore people. I'm glad to know about the weapon's history. You say you've been talking to Bagley? I didn't realize you were acquainted with him."

"Oh, yes. Yes indeed. We're old friends. I drop into his shop and chat with him now and then. He was just showing me an interesting note you wrote him. Something all about treason."

Mr. Bibbs laughed uncomfortably. "Jest a just. I mean, just a jest. I hope he isn't concerned over it."

MR. RYECROFT looked glum.

Mr. Bibbs sank back in his mound of pillows, said, "I've been working on a paper I'd like placed in Bagley's hands. Perhaps you'd do me the service of delivering it. If, as you've just said, you are a friend of Bagley's, I'm sure you will. I suppose Bagley has told you of the slight difficulty between us?"

"He made some such general allusion, yes."

"It's based solely, or mainly, on a misunderstanding. When Bagley's mother died at his birth, she left him a small estate of some twenty thousand dollars. This I invested for my son. When he attained his majority he clamored for his money. I, well, I felt that—ahem—that he needed a little self-discipline, so I withheld his inheritance. Invested it for him, you know. I wish to make amends. I'm a sick man; I doubt if I'll ever get up from this bed." He held out the slip of paper. "Be good enough to hand him this, sir. And remind him about my opinion on viewing the corpse."

"Viewing the corpse?"

"That's right. He'll know what you mean. I've broached the subject frequently, both to him in private, and to the town at large in public places. I don't object to an honest, ceremonial burial, but I've always considered the custom of looking upon the dead in their coffins as, well, heathenish. When I pass away I want my friends and relatives to remember me as I was, not as a product of some unskillful undertaker. I want to slip quietly from the public eye and be silently laid away—in a sealed casket. It's a little vanity my fellow townsmen will certainly grant me." He waved the paper impatiently.

Mr. Ryecroft came forward and took it. The script was identical with that of the treason note, but weak and shaky. The paper said, *April 25, 1830. The Dandridge Bank will pay on demand to Mr. Bagley Bibbs twenty thousand dollars and no cents. Azarias Bibbs.* Right on the nailhead, not a penny interest. Mr. Ryecroft folded it carefully and placed it in his wallet. He took a courteous departure.

As he stepped through the door into the hall, Mr. Bibbs halted him with a weak shout.

"I'm on my last legs, sir," Mr. Bibbs declared pitifully. "I'm about to face my Maker. I gave you a shabby deal and I want to do right by you. I admire your courage. Generally they squeal like pigs but there's not been a peep from you. I like you and I want you to like me. Here's my offer. You're going to need furniture and equipment and capital if you intend to start a hotel in that rathole on Stable Street. I want to advance you the money to get started. At reasonable rates, of course. What do you say?"

Mr. Ryecroft was a practical man. Instantly he agreed. "Very well. As a purely business deal."

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"Splendid. See me tomorrow. I like to sleep on these things, you know. Just put yourself in my hands, sir. I'll take care of you!" He closed his eyes and Mr. Ryecroft shut the door softly behind him.

He descended the spiral stairs to the lower floor and sought out Mr. Bibbs' study. After a bit of wandering, he located it, a small comfortable room at the end of the hall.

Mr. Ryecroft struck a lucifer and lighted a whale-oil lamp. It was a pleasant room, a little on the topsy-turvy side for the schoolmaster's taste, but obviousy a workroom. The walls were lined with books bound in calf and morocco. A three-legged stool stood at a clerk's desk. A bearskin rug was thrown over a hefty chest of quartered oak. Mr. Ryecroft rummaged through the desk, and among a sheaf of miscellaneous document he found a small iron key. He opened the chest with the key, saw a set of ledgers and a canvas cash bag. Investigating, he found that the bag contained about three thousand dollars. This wasn't surprising; a man like Mr. Bibbs, engaged in so many semi-private homemade enterprises, might have much money on hand. It would be accounted for in the ledgers.

Mr. Ryecroft pulled up the stool and began a systematic inspection of the ledgers. He discovered many interesting things—among them the fact that Azarias Bibbs had sold his run-down building six times, at prices ranging from fifty to two hundred dollars, always buying it back at sheriff sales; that Mr. Bibbs flourished as a money-lender; that while Mr. Bibbs owned not quite half of the town, his interests were indeed varied and profitable. Mr. Ryecroft replaced the ledgers and locked the chest.

He then turned his attention to the bookshelves.

A large calfbound volume, entitled *History of Legal Penalties,* had a paper-knife thrust into its pages as a bookmarker. Mr. Ryecroft drew it from its shelf, perused the marked page. He read,

> . . . the sixteenth century. In 1531, under Henry VIII, a statute was passed declaring the crime of poisoning to be treason, and every such act to be high treason, and providing that all such offenders should be boiled in oil. . . .

So that was it. Mr. Bibbs was under the illusion that he was being poisoned. And obliquely, and in great secrecy, he had tried to inform Bagley of this fact. 1531—that was the date mentioned in his note. Now the cryptic references to treason, and the boiling in oil quotation from Shakespeare, became clear.

As Mr. Ryecroft leaned forward to replace the book, his eye caught a shimmering, pearly gleam from the recess. He drew forth from its hiding place behind the row of volumes an old friend—Mr. Bibbs' Dinsmore dueling pistol. Pearl handle, engraved butt, and all. Restoring the book to its aperture, he carried the pistol to the hearth. Here, he plucked a straw from the hearthbroom, dropped the straw into the weapon's bore, extracted it and measured it with his thumbnail. The gun was empty, uncharged. Despite a coating of new oil on its muzzle, he decided it had been recently fired.

He dropped the pistol into his coat pocket, motto, criosphinx and all, and left the house.

NIGHT had settled over Dandridge when Mr. Ryecroft reached the shop of Bagley Bibbs—to find it shuttered and bolted and a note on the door saying, *Shop is Closed—Back Later.* One does not thrust a draft for twenty thousand dollars under a door like an election handbill, so Mr. Ryecroft decided he had best return later.

He directed his steps down Stable Street and ascended the broad flags to the Ryecroft House. He was a little startled to see a candle burning in the window, lighting his way.

He entered the door, fetched the tallow with him as he moved through the building, and was amazed at the change that had taken place since he'd last seen it. The floors and walls were scrupulously clean; the window sills had been sealed with tar, the ceiling plaster patched, and the woodwork competely refurnished. Pine branches had been burned in the hearths and now the weight of stale, dead air was gone, replaced by a friendly, pungent fragrance.

Billy Hackett was in the kitchen, preparing supper. He squatted on his haunches at the fireplace, cooking a skillet of bacon and flapjacks. He grinned, said, "Jest in time, John. If I'd had me some saleratus I'd have made some biscuits. Set down an' eat. They's honey on the table."

There was a table, all right. Other bits of furniture, too, had materialized during Mr. Ryecroft's absence. There was a pair of second-hand cots, a couple of not too badly broken chairs. The boy laid out the steaming meal. "I got the inside clean," he said. "Tomorrer I'll fix up the outside, hang the shutters, fix the roof slates, touch 'er up a bit with paint."

"And where," Mr. Ryecroft asked dryly, "is the paint coming from?"

"From the paint store. They're bringin' it around in the mornin'. White for the doorsill an' green for the shutters." The boy reached in his pocket, came up with an exquisite tortoise shell snuffbox. "You use snuff?"

"Occasionally. Yes." Mr. Ryecroft frowned. "But—"

"From now on yo're usin' it all the time. Whenever yo're talkin' business. All the big businessmen in the East use snuff. We can't afford to get you the new suit o' clothes you need just now so we'll settle for the snuffbox.

Matter o' fact, it'll go mighty slick with that chawbacon face o' yores, an' that backwoods homespun. Folks'll put you down as a countryman—until you pull out yore snuffbox. Then they'll say whoa, thur, they's a heap more to this feller than meets the eye. Cheap clothes, but a mighty, mighty fine snuffbox. I'll bet he's a sharp 'un!"

Mr. Ryecroft suddenly lost his appetite. "Billy," he asked in a level voice, "have you been stealing?"

"No, John." The boy shook his ponderous head. "I ain't had time scarcely. I been too damn busy bein' honest."

"Would you," Mr. Ryecroft asked softly, "care to explain?"

The boy's blue eyes went bland. "I been readin' that book like you told me, John. About debtors an' creditors an' bills of exchange an' sech. That's too deep for me. You'll have to handle the business part, John."

"Billy, where did these things come from? This furniture, that paint you mention, this—"

"I bought 'em, John. The town's cryin' for another hotel. We got to set up as soon as we can!"

"Very well, you bought them. Where did you get the money?"

"The money? Oh, I jest borried it, John."

"Where, might I ask?"

"At the bank, John. They tell me when folks wants to borry money they—"

"Oh, you borrowed the money at the bank. On your face?"

"On our insurance policy. When they saw we'd insured the place they knowed we really meant to open up an' they was glad to lend—"

Mr. Ryecroft's voice was taut. "I don't recall insuring—"

"I did. I knew you meant to. After I got everythin' scrubbed an' all, I just hunted up a insurance—"

Mr. Ryecroft's eyes glinted. This was it, this was the question that would reveal everything. He felt like a drunkard who had somehow stumbled through an intricate garden maze. He felt weak and confused. Slowly, and somewhat triumphantly, he asked, "And where did you get the money for the policy? Insurance costs money, Billy. Where did—"

"I hypothecated. That's a word I read in yore law book, John. It means pawned. I figgered if you was goin' to run a hotel you wouldn't need them schoolbooks no more, so I pawned 'em. I took the money an'—"

For a long moment Mr. Ryecroft sat in stony silence. Finally he spoke. "You'd have gotten along very well with my father, Billy. You and he hold the same general disregard for scholarship. And I'm ashamed to admit that your logic leaves me somewhat bewildered."

Supper over, Mr. Ryecroft took a pinch of snuff from his new snuffbox. Billy Hackett got

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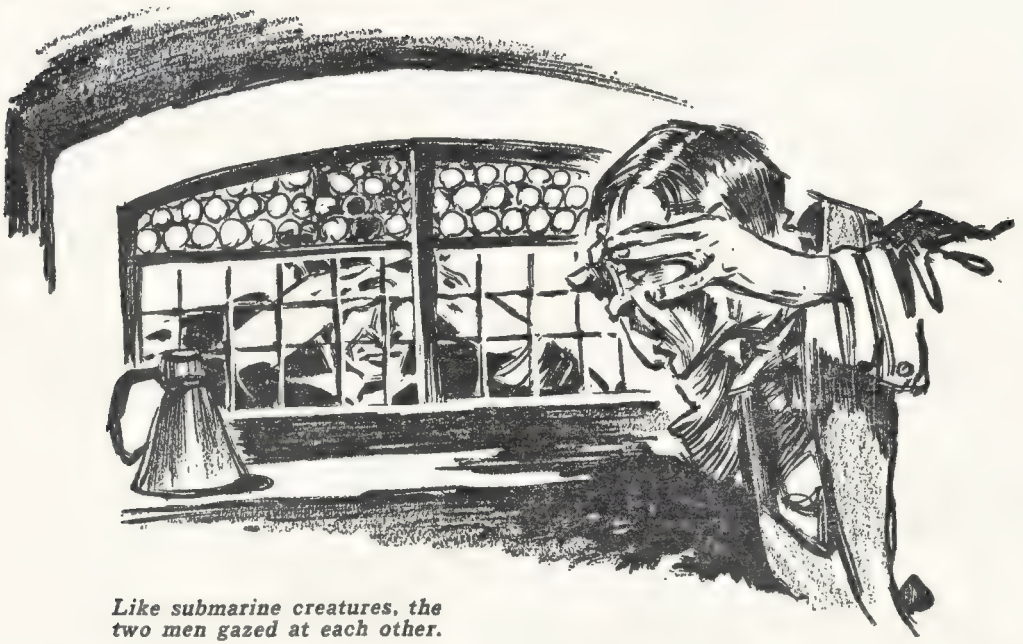


Like submarine creatures, the two men gazed at each other.

out his corncob pipe, put fire to its bowl, and relaxed. Step by step, aloud, Mr. Ryecroft reviewed his experiences during the day for the boy. Billy Hackett listened moodily.

At last he spoke. "Funny thing. I was passin' by when Captain Falconer was bein' buried this afternoon. Not in the reg'lar buryin' ground back on Lebanon Street, but in a corner of the little weed-growed churchyard out by the grist mill. Two rough lookin' fellers was diggin' the grave an' lowerin' the coffin—a big red-headed critter in a red roundabout an' a smaller one in a long surtout."

"Poor chaps. They must be the same two who tried to sell me a clock this morning. Fye and Rodney they called themselves. Trying to turn a respectable penny, I imagine." Mr. Ryecroft sneezed; this Dandridge snuff really carried authority.

"That snuffbox really becomes you, John," the boy said in admiration. "Now we'll really git ahead in this business. No, John, this Fye an' his crony Rodney wasn't tryin' to turn a respectable penny. I've knowed 'em to speak to about town an' it ain't in their blood. I figger Azarias Bibbs hired 'em to put the captain below earth because it was cheaper than if he'd hired the regular church sexton. I bet he paid 'em off in peppered rum!"

Mr. Ryecroft clucked in reproach, then got to his feet. The twenty thousand-dollar draft was weighing heavily in his breast pocket. He said that he had a bit of business to take care of, that he might be home any time, that growing boys needed sleep and it might be a good idea for Billy to retire. Billy replied that he couldn't fall asleep if he went to bed before ten o'clock and thought he'd drop around and watch a game of ninepins. Mr. Ryecroft looked disapproving, but offered no verbal objection.

Bagley Bibbs' shop was still closed, or rather it was again closed. A sign now read simply, *Back Soon.* Bagley had evidently returned only to go out again. Mr. Ryecroft was nettled that he'd missed him.

It was the supper hour, that interval between night shift and day shift, and the basin was hushed and deserted. The slender, hulking packets, indistinct in the gloaming, seemed frozen in the polished black water of the canal; the broad paved street was empty now, empty of carts and drays, silent and for the moment forgotten, caught in an instant between two worlds.

Mr. Ryecroft shook Mr. Bagley Bibbs' latch. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he made a funnel of his hands, pressed them against the window and peered within.

And at that instant, almost in the same spot, Mr. Bagley Bibbs, from the shadows of the shop's interior, made a funnel of his hands and peered out. Thus, like submarine creatures, the two men gazed at each other, their faces enclosed in cupped hands, their eyes scarcely six inches apart. It was obvious that Mr. Bagley Bibbs was scared out of his wits and Mr. Ryecroft was forced to admit that he underwent sensations of a similar nature.

Almost instantly Mr. Bagley disappeared and a moment later the door opened. The young man said petulantly, "It's you! Back again! Can't you leave me alone? What do you want this time?"

Mr. Ryecroft believed a man's written word should be a thing of honor. He said frigidly, "Your sign. It's a falsification. It says you're out. And you're not out! I can't say that I approve of—"

"I'm composing music, in the back room, with a blanket over my head, if you must know. I've an instinct for music and this period in the evening is the only hour of quiet, night or day, along the waterfront. I keep changing the signs as a matter of suggestion. It makes my customers come back. I dislike interruptions. However, if you're in desperate need of something, perhaps—"

Mr. Ryecroft produced the draft from his wallet. "I'd like to pass along this twenty thousand dollars," he said stiffly. Succinctly, he touched on the conversation with the young man's father. This done, he whipped out his snuffbox, took a dignified pinch of snuff, bowed, and departed.

It was a very pleasant moment. One that wouldn't occur in a good many lifetimes. He wished that Billy Hackett could have been on hand to witness it.

DR. VANZART, white as a sheet, sat straddle-legged on the delicate French chair in his elegant room at Mr. Bibbs' Red Buck Inn, and watched Mr. Ryecroft with glassy eyes. Three times he tried to speak and each time sounds came, but no words. He was in his shirt sleeves and each effort at communication was accompanied by a listless waving of the wrist which fluffed his spotless frilled cuffs. His glossy muttonchop whiskers now seemed artifically attached to his otherwise boyish cheeks; his legs, asprawl in their tight black broadcloth, seemed without grace or energy. He didn't look like a doctor. He looked like a schoolboy.

Mr. Ryecroft said, "I'd like to talk with you a moment, sir. I'd like to hear your opinion. Do you consider Mr. Azarias Bibbs to be seriously ill?"

The doctor's mouth moved wordlessly; up came the frilled cuff in a desperate, speechless gesture. Mr. Ryecroft was in no hurry. He passed the time by gazing about the room. It was a very attractive room, immaculate with sanded floorboards, with good linen on the bed. In a flight of fancy he wondered if the Ryecroft House would ever attain such splendor. It was pretty apparent that the doctor himself was unwell. Mr. Ryecroft said patiently, "Is Mr. Azarias Bibbs actually a sick man?"

With great effort, the doctor spoke. His words were hollow, vibrant, as though he were talking into a jug. He said, "Azarias Bibbs, sir, is not sick."

"I thought not," Mr. Ryecroft remarked. "Something about him struck me as—"

"Azarias Bibbs is not sick," Dr. Vanzart repeated. "He's dead."

Mr. Ryecroft said simply, "I'm sorry to hear it."

"If you're sorry," Dr. Vanzart exclaimed, "then consider my position! It's all so strange to me, it's almost a dream. What's Dandridge going to say? I was the great man's physician. I'll be held culpable. What's to become of me? These backwoods towns are not too understanding. I'm at the end of my career." Dr. Vanzart grinned mirthlessly. "I got it over with in a hurry, didn't I? Out of medical school with muttonchop whiskers and a sheepskin, up like a balloon, *bang!* and it's all finished before I know what's what. I'll never get another patient, not in this town."

"You say it's strange," Mr. Ryecroft commented. "Death is an ancient and honorable procedure. What's so strange about it?"

"Everything's strange about it. As you said a moment ago, the man wasn't sick. A little distraught, perhaps, but certainly displaying no critical symptoms. A strange disease destroyed him beneath my very nose."

"You're quite familiar with sickness, injury, and death, Doctor?"

"Of course I'm familiar with it," the young man said coldly. "I'm a graduate physician, am I not? Though I'm somewhat lacking in practice, I have the advantage of being unprejudiced and unspoiled. I can dissect and anatomize blindfolded. I'm an avid student and, in modesty, can say that I've read just about every medical word published from the ancients to the moderns."

"What do you think killed Azarias Bibbs? Was he poisoned?"

Dr. Vanzart shook his head. "No. Something just went wrong." He spoke as though he were addressing a child. "The human body is activated by a species of electric fluid. This electric fluid ceased functioning. It's just that simple. But try to explain that to a canal town!"

"Where is he now?"

"He's being prepared for burial, according the instructions contained in a note he left on his pillow, by two men, a fellow named Fye and his assistant, Rodney. Gad, I need a drink but I'm afraid to take one. The next few days I'll have to be on my toes. I'm going to be deluged with questions. Why didn't I put a Bermuda onion under his bed? Did I try mustard plasters? Did he have money hidden under his carpet? When he was *in extremis* why didn't I consult with Mrs. Thingamabob, the local midwife, who saves lives by an amulet of goat's hair and gallus buttons?"

"How did you happen to tie up with Mr. Bibbs in the first place?"

Dr. Vanzart frowned. "You might say it was Fate. Through a remarkable string of coincidences. Believe it or not, I was first affiliated with him as a sort of business advisor. It was a talent I never realized I possessed until he brought it to light. Fresh out of school, I went to Cincinnati but found competition rather keen so I took a trip north to look over the terrain. I was on the deck of the packet one evening when Mr. Bibbs joined me for a smoke. I didn't know who he was, of course. We were bowling along merrily at about three miles an hour, and I was worrying about the five cents a mile it was costing me, when he sat down beside me and began discussing, of all things, finance. I staggered through the conversation."

Mr. Ryecroft visualized the situation, found it unattractive. "You have my sympathy."

"But he was impressed. That was the astounding part. He told me he owned the packet we were on, and had large interests in the town of Dandridge. He became very friendly and enthusiastic. I was a natural genius, he said. When it came out inadvertently that I was a physician, he was even more delighted. He persuaded me to establish myself here as his personal doctor and advisor."

Mr. Ryecroft asked mildly, "What did you advise him on?"

Dr. Vanzart hesitated. "Captain Falconer, mainly. The captain was spending a little more money than he earned. I had access to Mr. Bibbs' account books. I kept close check on the captain but never caught him in any defalcations."

Mr. Ryecroft arose, picked up his beaver. "Who gets the money? His sons?"

"I don't believe he ever made a will. He wasn't particularly friendly with young Bagley, I understand." Dr. Vanzart paused, added, "He left rather remarkable instructions about his interment. He'll be buried tomorrow—in a sealed coffin."

Mr. Ryecroft said politely, "I'll try to be at the funeral."

CHAPTER V

OBSEQUIES FOR MR. BIBBS

THE spring night was sweet scented and balmy and the lights from shaving parlors and public houses and shops checkered the lawn in front of the courthouse, spangling the dark trees. It was the sort of a night Mr. Ryecroft enjoyed. His spirit urged him to dalliance but his weary body ordered him home to bed. He left Main Street, passed through an arched alley known as Kings Court, and came out on Stable Street.

Stable Street was as dark as the inside of a parson's purse.

Here, the tiny shops were closed and shadowy. The pavement was desolate and deserted. A hundred yards away, beyond the Ryecroft House, a solitary street lamp swathed the rambling warehouses in shadows; in its distant, watery nimbus the cobblestones seemed beaten from dull lead and the narrow glazed-brick sidewalk, down which Mr. Ryecroft walked, seemed almost non-existent to him except for the impact of his heels. Overhead, the deep purple sky, starless and dusty, flowed earthward along the curve of its arc, meeting and absorbing rooflines, chimneys and housetops.

Abruptly, as Mr. Ryecroft passed the mouth of a passageway, a man stepped out and accosted him.

He was a small man, shadowy and indistinct, wearing a mouldy old overcoat that reached to his ankles. In a servile, plaintive voice he asked, "Did you, or didn't you? That's what I want to know. Did you or—"

Mr. Ryecroft, a bit taken aback, said, "Did I what? I don't seem to—"

"Did you drop this? If'n it ain't yore'n, it's mine by finders keepers. I found it yonder"—he pointed to Mr. Ryecroft's house—"a-layin' by the doorstep." He struck a match against the brick wall, cupped it over an object he held loosely in his hand.

The bud of flame played along the engraved barrel of a pistol. The Dinsmore dueling pistol! Mr. Ryecroft was speechless. He fumbled at his pocket, exclaimed, "I couldn't have. No. No, I didn't."

The lucifer went out. Things happened. And fast.

Instantly Mr. Ryecroft realized he'd been tricked. Instantly he realized that dueling pistols came in pairs, that the pistol in the small man's hand was merely a decoy to get him, by word or gesture, to admit he was carrying its mate. Instantly, too, in the after-image of the match, he saw the little man before him in memory, remembered him as one of the clock salesmen, the one who had dropped his clock, the one known as Rodney. . .

A second man, much bigger than his cohort, lunged from the alley mouth, encircling the schoolteacher with bands of hard sinew, pinning his arms to his sides. This would be the red-haired Fye, Striker Fye, the renegade smith.

Mr. Ryecroft struggled. Rodney said hoarsely, "He's got it, all right. He's got it in his pocket!" Fye twisted him this way and that, trying to throw him to the ground. Mr. Ryecroft kept his balance.

Rodney tore the gun from his coat and Mr. Ryecroft, cursing between stiff lips, brought the heel of his heavy back-country boot down on the small man's instep. The pistol spun from Rodney's grasp, slithered out onto the cob-

blestones. Fye grunted, said viciously, "Give him the sandbag, Rodney. Give him the sandbag!"

And then, through the cloudy apron of the street lamp, Billy Hackett appeared. He appeared running, chin tucked into the hollow of his throat, great chest expanded, soft-footed and wraithlike as though he'd been running a hundred miles, as though he would run perpetually. Beneath the impact of Rodney's latest attack, Mr. Ryecroft went to his knees.

Like a silent, raging bear the boy was on them. Fye said, "It's Hugger O'Brien! Stay back, O'Brien!"

Rodney lashed at the boy with his sandbag and the boy raised his shoulder and caught the blow deftly, so that it merely glanced off. And then the boy swung, with the full weight of his body. His powerful fist crashed into Rodney, like a boulder into a shock of wheat, and the small man slammed into Fye, who was groping for his sheath knife. Fye, knocked against the brick wall, righted himself, and turned and ran, Rodney hard on his heels. The boy followed, not in pursuit, but as a farmwife shooing chickens from her garden might do. And Mr. Ryecroft, in the spirit of the chase, joined him. The hunt was short however, for the footpads soon outstripped them and vanished into the night.

Mr. Ryecroft, catching his breath, said accusingly, "Billy, you were following me!"

"All evenin'," the boy said quietly. "To the basin an' to the Red Buck Inn. When you took that shortcut through Kings Court you threw me off the trail."

Mr. Ryecroft said tensely, "Look, Billy! Look!"

A third man now emerged from the alleymouth, onto the pavement. A long block from them, they could only see that he wore a fine high beaver and a full-length cape. He strolled out onto the cobbles, glanced up and down the street, and picked up Mr. Ryecroft's pistol. His movements were decisive. It was apparent that he knew what he wanted, and where to find it. Mr. Ryecroft said softly, "That, Billy, is the chap who's behind this whole bloody affair. He engineered our attack. He was in the alleyway, watching."

The man got to his feet, brushed off his knees. Mr. Ryecroft said, "We have him now, Billy my lad. We've got him boxed. Start walking toward him. We'll cut him off from the alley. To escape us he must pass beneath the streetlight. One look is all I want."

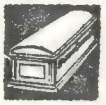
And then the man in the cape, from his nest of shadows, saw them. Stiffly and rapidly, he walked down the pavement, away from them. They kept their eyes on his retreating back, waiting for him to pass beneath the light.

This, he never did.

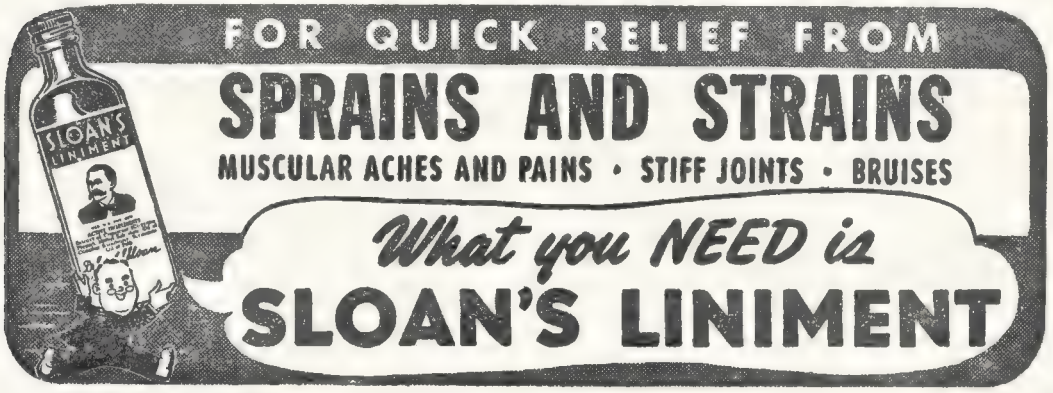
When he reached Mr. Ryecroft's old inn, he turned smartly on his heel, ascended the stone steps, and entered. They saw him push open the sagging door. Then the blackness of the building enveloped him.

Billy Hackett growled. "You see that, John? What's he doin' in our place?"

"He's doing nothing at all." Mr. Ryecroft's voice was brittle. "He's just passing through, front door to rear court to alley—thus effecting a very neat maneuver. Bless my heart. Outwitted us right through our own house! The man's too brilliant; I don't care for him. Come, Billy, let's go to bed."

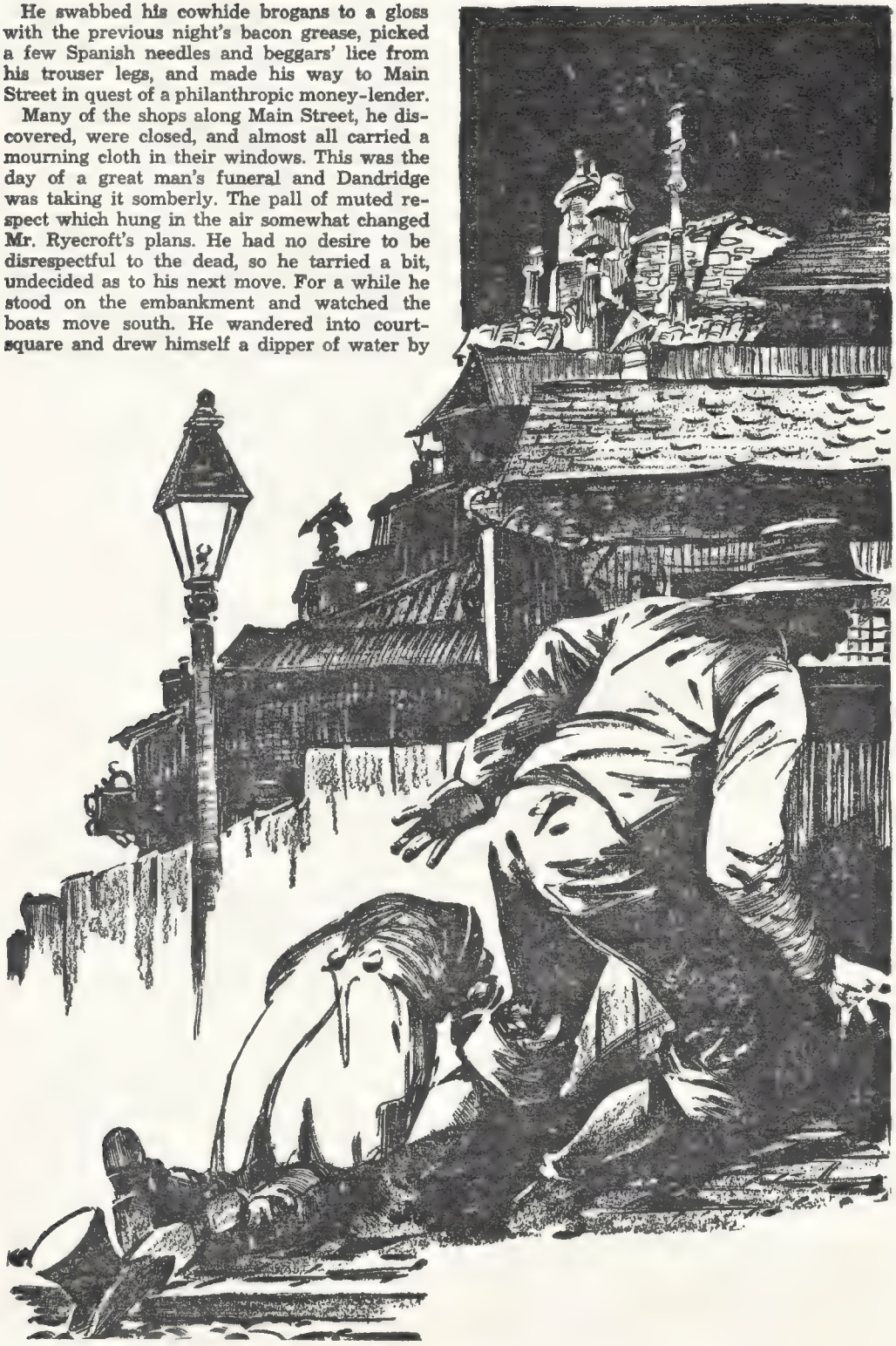


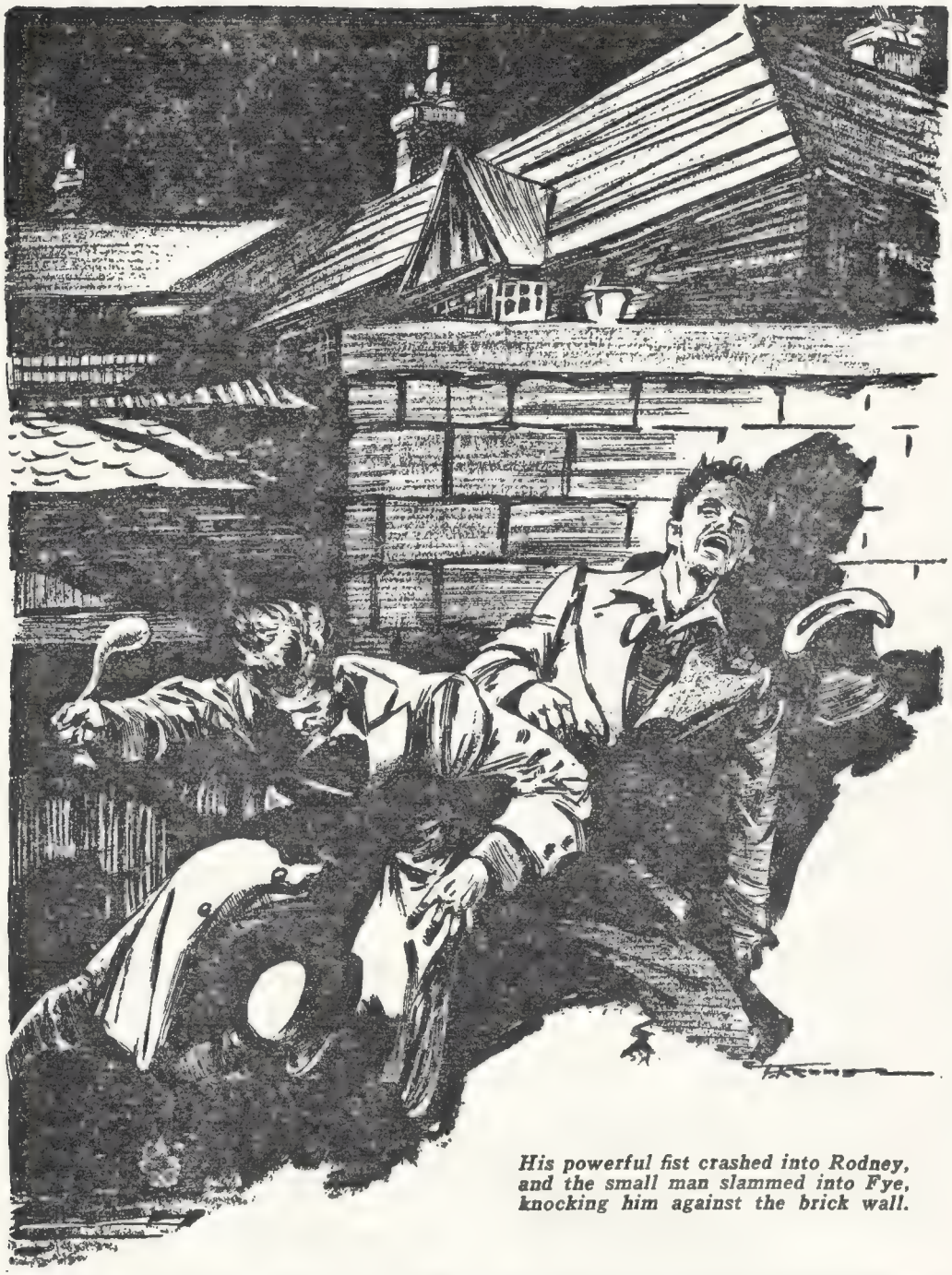
MR. RYECROFT awoke at eight and fixed breakfast. Young Hackett had been up and at work for hours. He'd rehung the shutters; the paint had come and he'd given the front door a coat of white. Already the place was looking habitable. The remainder of the day, he explained, he expected to devote to fixing the roof slates. Over corn pone, salt pork and tea, he suggested that Mr. Ryecroft sally forth with his snuffbox and new-found dignity and negotiate for a sign and furniture. Mr. Ryecroft concurred. With the sudden demise of Mr. Bibbs, he'd lost, paradoxically, both an oppressor and a sponsor. He felt strangely free.


FOR QUICK RELIEF FROM
SPRAINS AND STRAINS
MUSCULAR ACHES AND PAINS • STIFF JOINTS • BRUISES
What you NEED is
SLOAN'S LINIMENT
SLOAN'S LINIMENT

He swabbed his cowhide brogans to a gloss with the previous night's bacon grease, picked a few Spanish needles and beggars' lice from his trouser legs, and made his way to Main Street in quest of a philanthropic money-lender.

Many of the shops along Main Street, he discovered, were closed, and almost all carried a mourning cloth in their windows. This was the day of a great man's funeral and Dandridge was taking it somberly. The pall of muted respect which hung in the air somewhat changed Mr. Ryecroft's plans. He had no desire to be disrespectful to the dead, so he tarried a bit, undecided as to his next move. For a while he stood on the embankment and watched the boats move south. He wandered into court-square and drew himself a dipper of water by





His powerful fist crashed into Rodney, and the small man slammed into Fye, knocking him against the brick wall.

turning the huge wagon wheel on its frame above the public well; after a bit, he sat on a bench beneath a hackberry tree.

A postboy galloped down the street on a thoroughbred horse, passed in a rataplan of hooves. The Baltimore mail. Those little rascals and their blooded mares, he'd heard, could average sixteen miles an hour from the seacoast, night and day . . . He watched a sparrow build a nest in the courthouse louver. . .

After a while a man came into the square and seated himself on the lawn, a man with a

military drum. Shortly thereafter he was joined by four other men, carrying horns and bugles and drums. A sulky came out of a side street with a small brass cannon lashed to its axle. More people came into courtsquare; gigs and surreys and buggies began to assemble around the watering-trough. The men and women were prosperous-looking, solemn-faced; their vehicles had black crepe woven in and out of the wheel-spokes. The men with the musical instruments piled into a three-seated wagon. A cart drawn by four black horses, and carrying a flower-covered casket, took its place at the head of the line. The band of music began to play martial airs and the funeral procession moved off down the street and around the corner.

Mr. Ryecroft was impressed. Azarias Bibbs must have indeed been a great man if he rated a cannon. The little schoolteacher arose and followed on foot. His feet were hurting him a little.

The Woodside Cemetery was out on Race Street—but a thicket away, in fact, from the Azarias Bibbs mansion. It was a trim place, bordered on the street by a waist-high wrought iron fence and extending away to the rear in fields and pastureland. The obsequies had not yet begun and Mr. Ryecroft, joining the crowd about the hearse, saw that Dr. Vanzart had been correct—the casket was indeed sealed. In fact it looked more like an elongated strongbox than a coffin; it was made of heavy oak with knees and bands of strip-iron. There was no lock, however.

The sepulture began. The parson said his words, the casket was lowered, the band played, and the little brass cannon boomed in final requiem. Everyone, Mr. Ryecroft noticed, was weeping. Everyone except himself; Sheriff Zopkan Fye, who lounged against a wagon hub; Dr. Vanzart, who was gallantly on hand with a blue-glass bottle of smelling salts for the ladies; and Bagley Bibbs, who stood quietly in the background, more like a sympathetic onlooker than a close member of the family.

Mr. Ryecroft, his head respectfully uncovered, left the cemetery. So immersed in thought was he that he'd almost reached home before it occurred to him to put his hat back on his head.

The first thing Billy Hackett said to him when he reached home was, "I hear they buried Old Bibbs in a strongbox."

Mr. Ryecroft asked in astonishment, "And where, pray, did you hear that?"

"It's all over town. Everybuddy's talkin' about it. How come a sealed coffin, John? They afraid he might git away?"

Mr. Ryecroft took off his coat and picked up a paint brush. "It's unseemly to joke about the deceased, Billy," he declared sternly. He suddenly relented, said drolly, "The man walked down the street carrying himself nobly and a loaf of bread. Now you can laugh if you care to. Carrying himself and a loaf of bread. That's a respectable joke. It's a rhetorical trope known as zeugma. It's in good taste. The medieval grammarians considered such a whimsy riotously comic."

Billy Hackett said, "I guess I'm not educated. Did you git the loan?"

"No," Mr. Ryecroft answered. "Not yet."

IT WAS about three o'clock that afternoon that Bagley Bibbs dropped in on them. His visit was entirely unexpected and caught Mr. Ryecroft with a pail of water and a rag, sponging off the face of the building; he hadn't been so embarrassed since the time back in Wolf Scalp when the "big boys" had gone on a spree and "barred" him from his school, so that he had had to demean himself according to local custom and buy his way back in with cakes and tea.

Young Mr. Bibbs had doffed his green slit-tailed coat and green pantaloons for a slovenly suit of shapeless drab, which was no doubt the best his wardrobe could produce in the way of mourning. The slump to his fragile shoulders seemed more pronounced, now, and his little snail-like eyes behind the lenses of their steel-rimmed spectacles were cloudy with confusion and grief. He said, "I hope I'm not interrupting your labors, sir. I merely wanted to apologize for my conduct and manner last evening, and to thank you for the draft you brought me from my late father."

Mr. Ryecroft smiled gently. "Accept my sympathy for your bereavement, Mr. Bibbs. And the money I brought you is just a drop in the bucket to what you will soon possess."

"How do you mean? They tell me my father left no will."

"But you're the sole heir of his body, as the phrase has it. You're a wealthy man, sir." Mr. Ryecroft almost added, *You, too, will rate a cannon when you depart this earth.*

Bagley Bibbs shook his head. "I'm making a meager living and am quite contented. I don't want—"

"Heirs have felt that way before," Mr. Ryecroft remarked. "However, an unexpected bequest frequently proves itself a charming and fascinating house guest." Gracefully, he changed the subject. "I hope to open an inn here, as soon as I assemble a few appointments. Permit me to show you over the premises." He called, "Billy!" The boy, on the roof, thrust his head over the eaves. Mr. Ryecroft said, "Permit me to present my junior partner, Billy Hackett. This, Billy, is Mr. Bagley Bibbs."

Billy gave the man a hard stare, said greedily, "Glad to meetcha. How about lending us a little—"

Mr. Ryecroft took his visitor by the elbow,

edged him through the door. "Now this, sir, will be the parlor when . . ."

The tour of the house and grounds completed, they stood a moment on the curb. Bagley said awkwardly, "You know, sir, you're fast becoming just about the only friend I have. I'm not of a particularly cordial nature. Also, I'm impressed with your solidarity. I wonder if you could help me with a rather personal problem. I'm a little worried about that diamond and that ruby."

This was new to Mr. Ryecroft. He listened politely.

Mr. Bibbs said placidly, "It was an ironclad wish of my father's that he be buried in a sealed coffin, unviewed in death by his relatives and friends. He was an immensely vain man and he couldn't bear to be gazed on without being able to gaze back. He had a rather exalted opinion of his importance and wanted to be remembered at his best. His body, according to his wishes, was embalmed in private and buried in a sealed coffin. I respected these wishes of his, as did the town. However, Dandridge felt itself called upon to offer him a rather extravagant funeral, so—"

"You didn't see your father in death?"

"No. That was the way he wished it." Bagley shook his head. "Just the undertakers. His casket was brought to courtsquare where it headed the procession."

"What about this diamond and ruby?"

"That's what I don't like. I understand that he was buried with two valuable rings on him, a ruby and a diamond. This rumor, coupled with the tale of the sealed coffin, is sweeping the town. A yarn like that can be a bad thing when it gets started. I'm afraid of resurrectionists—grave-robbers."

Mr. Ryecroft said nothing. Bagley Bibbs said carefully, "It may actually be a case of deliberately locking the barn after the horse is stolen. It's possible, isn't it? To my mind a sealed coffin doesn't mean a coffin that's banded with iron. A simple oak coffin, bolted, would more than fill the prescription. Now look at it this way—say the person, or persons, who prepared him for burial took these rings themselves and banded the coffin to prevent a disclosure of their theft. If this is so, it grieves me, for two baubles, a diamond and a ruby, are little enough for my father to take with him as he departs this sphere of mortal men. If he wanted it that way, he should have it that way."

Mr. Ryecroft said, "Exactly, sir. A true filial sentiment!"

Mr. Bagley Bibbs bowed. "I'm keeping you from your work."

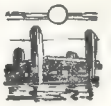
"Not at all. Good day, sir."

As Mr. Bagley Bibbs' lank figure diminished lazily in the distance, Billy Hackett swung down, dropped to the pavement. He asked in a hoarse whisper, "How'd we make out, John?"

Mr. Ryecroft hardly heard him; his mind was busy with other matters. He said slowly, "I think we'll go visiting tonight, William. I think we'll drop in on a little shop on Elm Street and chat a bit with Striker Fye and his friend Rodney. This time I'm taking you with me."

CHAPTER VI

DEATH IN DUPLICATE



THE night was well advanced when Mr. Ryecroft and his junior partner turned into Elm Street. It was a dingy street, narrow, foul underfoot and unpaved, a street of doubtful occupations and many secrets. Above their heads the ramshackle cornices jutted black against the sky and the high, luminous moon, shining down into the slot-like passage, laid violet shadows about their ankles. Mr. Ryecroft came to a halt, said, "Well, here we are." In the faint moonlight they could make out the lettering on the darkened window—

FYE & COMPANY
Deluxe Undertakers—Second-Hand Goods
Dental Mechanics—Wells Dug
Firewood Bought & Sold

The building was sordid and squalid, of cheap stucco. The inside shutters behind the windowpane were drawn; Mr. Ryecroft jiggled the latch and smote the door. There was no answer, no sign of light or life. Billy Hackett said pensively, "The way they do it in Boston, they smash the glass an' bore through the shutter with a center bit. You can git at the bolt then, an'—"

Mr. Ryecroft ignored him. The boy said, "Let's try the back. Mebbe they're in the back."

They circled the shop, came out into a neat, slate-paved court. Across the slates they faced the rear of a trim three-story building spotted here and there with lighted windows. Azarias Bibbs' words came back to Mr. Ryecroft: *I ran into the court . . . Captain Falconer lay on the slates, blood pouring from his chest.* This was the court where Captain Falconer had been shot, and that lighted building yonder was the Red Buck Inn! The establishment of Fye and Company abutted the fastidious hostelry.

There was a metallic *crack*, a splintering of wood, and Billy Hackett said softly, "Doggone. The door come open." Mr. Ryecroft turned to see his junior partner extract a wagon spring from the wrecked doorjamb and lay it on the ground. The boy said, "If the door's open, we might as well go in."

Mr. Ryecroft followed him inside. Billy lighted a candle, said cheerfully, "I hope we don't run into 'em. I'm out o' patience with 'em since last night. What do we do now?"

"We look around a bit," Mr. Ryecroft announced.

The shop was composed of two rooms, the front room a jumble of odds-and-ends of broken down furniture, second-hand clothes, and battered kitchen utensils; and a back room which was apparently storeroom, living quarters, and workroom combined. The only thing which interested Mr. Ryecroft in the showroom was a row of three clocks, of the type he was so familiar with by now. He returned to the back room and started a painstaking search.

There was a trestle table here, obviously an appurtenance of the undertaker's trade, a cookstove, and a miscellany of rusty, ill-cared-for tools. He was about to give up in exasperation when he noticed the floor. The strange thing about it was that it was clean. There were muddy footprints on the threshold, and muddy tracks all over the showroom, but the feet that had made them, somehow, mysteriously, had left no unkempt trace on the workroom floor.

He gave the floor a minute inspection and thus discovered the trapdoor.

The panel was about five feet square and cleverly set in the corner, beyond the stove; the schoolmaster swung it back. Below him a crude ladder extended downward into a shaft. "I'll go first," Billy Hackett said. "I have the candle."

They descended, found themselves in a damp pit. A low tunnel, shored with timbers, stretched to their left. Cautiously, they followed it; the walls were new-hewn and moist and the path beneath their feet was muddy with seepage from the nearby river. Abruptly, the tunnel ended.

They came out into a small, brick-lined chamber.

The air was fetid, heavy. Tree-roots had cracked the walls and through gaping zigzag cracks they could see the sleek yellow clay. Planking had been laid crisscross on the slimy ground, and on this makeshift flooring were piled boxes and crates. Mr. Ryecroft clucked his tongue in disapproval. The boxes had been ripped open and he peered within.

"Five cases of Sheffield ax-heads," he invoiced. "Two of door locks. Eight of French china, two of imported brass hinges. Here lieth Mr. Potter's mislaid merchandise."

Billy Hackett asked, "Where are we? I never seen a place like this before."

"We're in the powder magazine and supply room of the old fort. Under the Red Buck Inn. Sheriff Zopkan Fye told me about it—his father used to pack-horse stores here in the old days. It must be a family tradition—so Striker Fye and his friend Rodney are using it for stolen goods." Mr. Ryecroft held the candle aloft. Directly overhead, in the old brick, was a lighter, newer square of brick. "When the inn was established they bricked in the old entrance. The place was too wet for use, so they blocked it off. Fye and Rodney drove their tunnel in and had a perfect cubbyhole."

Mr. Ryecroft lifted the lid of a large crate, exclaimed, "For goodness sakes!" Inside were half a dozen fine clocks. "Stolen, too. This disturbs me, William. I don't—"

On the floor of the crate lay a wallet and two dueling pistols, the Dinsmore pistols. Both of them, finally, side by side. "We'll leave the weapons where they are. They make an ugly picture of evidence. However, I'd like to see this." He picked up the wallet, examined its contents.

A name, stamped in gold leaf inside the wallet's flap, said *Mark Dinsmore*. There were three papers in the leather pocket. A letter from a Connecticut clock manufacturer to a mercantile house in St. Louis saying that the bearer was Mr. Mark Dinsmore and that he was envoy in charge of a shipment of fine clocks which were to be disposed of in St. Louis if the prices were right, otherwise Mr. Dinsmore had orders to take the same on down to New Orleans. With this letter was a bill of lading: clocks in charge of Mr. Mark Dinsmore, New York to St. Louis, via Cincinnati. There was also a small envelope —an envelope containing an onyx watch fob, *intaglio* with a criosphinx and the motto *Animis opibusque parati*. No watch, just the chain and fob.

Mr. Ryecroft replaced the tragic relics tenderly. "This is a beastly affair, Billy. Anything can happen along the waterfront in Cincinnati. Potter escaped. Mark Dinsmore perished."

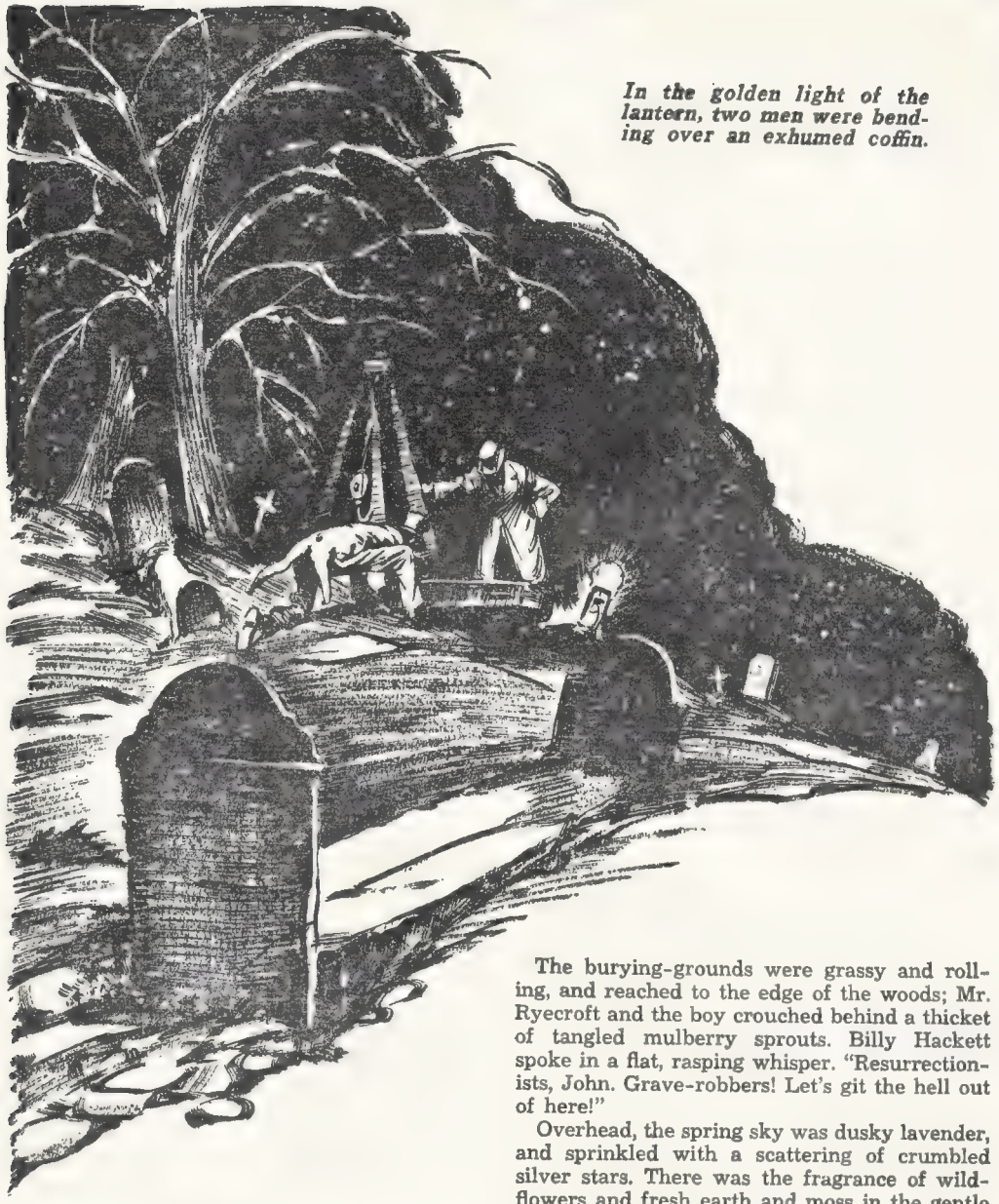
"Take the waterfront in Savannah," Billy Hackett said. "There's a bad one. I almost perished there myself."

"This is different, Billy. This is devilish. This is planned." Mr. Ryecroft hesitated. "I dislike doing it, but I expect I must. After all, I'm obligated by human decency. We'd better be on our way, I guess."

"To where?"

"To Azarias Bibbs' beautiful, expensive, stone mansion. I'd better finish this up tonight. It's gone farther than I thought."

RACE STREET, two blocks back from the canal, was Dandridge's finest residential thoroughfare. After they left the immediate environs of the business district, the schoolteacher and the boy passed through a neighborhood of imposing dwellings, nighthooded and austere, and came to the town's outskirts; the grounds became more extensive, and the homes fewer, and finally the houses thinned out to dark, wild pastureland. Mr. Ryecroft touched the boy on the arm. "We'll cut across the fields, here. The Bibbs' house is yonder, beyond that clump of trees. I hope we're not interrupted; I'd very much like another look at those



In the golden light of the lantern, two men were bending over an exhumed coffin.

private account books." They left the road and took an angling footpath into a grove of hickories.

They'd walked perhaps a hundred yards when Billy said softly, "Over there, John. A campfire."

Through the tree boles Mr. Ryecroft saw the small, flickering light. "That's in the cemetery. In Woodside Cemetery!" His voice was troubled, faint. "That's no campfire. Perhaps we'd better see what's going on."

The burying-grounds were grassy and rolling, and reached to the edge of the woods; Mr. Ryecroft and the boy crouched behind a thicket of tangled mulberry sprouts. Billy Hackett spoke in a flat, rasping whisper. "Resurrectionists, John. Grave-robbers! Let's git the hell out of here!"

Overhead, the spring sky was dusky lavender, and sprinkled with a scattering of crumbled silver stars. There was the fragrance of wildflowers and fresh earth and moss in the gentle air. A lantern stood upright on a pile of clay, and beside it, leaning against nearby tombstones, were two long-handled shovels. Two men were bending over an exhumed coffin.

The golden light of the lantern hung in the night, cup-shaped against the ground, gilding all within its tiny, wavering circle, highlighting Striker Fye's red hair, glazing the pupils of his avaricious eyes, and illuminating his companion, Rodney, so that little man's evil face and mouldy overcoat seem carved from rotting wood. Above the excavated casket stood a tri-

pod of barked poles the thickness of a man's thigh, and from the tripod's apex hung a block and tackle. In Striker Fye's hand was a pinchbar.

A trembling took hold of Mr. Ryecroft's spare figure at the outrageous sight, and indignation flooded his reason with fire. He arose to his full height so that the mulberry bushes were like black fagots about his waist, and called out in a thunderous baritone, "God have mercy on your souls, you vandals!" He reached for the pistol he hadn't carried for seventeen years, the pistol he'd worn in his belt from his cabin to the Lake, the weapon which he'd lost in the battle against Tecumseh, and burst through the shrubbery into the open.

Striker Fye and Rodney froze like frightened animals, then broke into a lope, disappeared into a lip of distant underbrush.

In the light of the lantern, they examined the grave. Mr. Bibbs' strongbox coffin had been completely removed, its stout cover pried off, and the body turned partially on its side.

Mr. Bibbs, in death, seemed much more relaxed and beatific than he'd seemed in life. He was dressed as Mr. Ryecroft had first encountered him, in his bright blue Newmarket coat and crimson velvet waistcoat. His fat jowls were benevolently tranquil and his eyelids serenely closed. Billy Hackett caught his breath, exclaimed, "Azarias Bibbs! You know what, John? I thought it was all a trick. I didn't figure he was really—"

Mr. Ryecroft remarked idly, "There are no rings on his fingers. If he was interred with any gems, they're gone." He extinguished the lantern. "We'd best call in the authority of the law. Things are very bad indeed. Now, finally, I think I understand everything. I'm going on. You'd better scamper back and get Sheriff Zopkan Fye. Bring him to the Bibbs' mansion. Come right in. If you see a light in the study, that will be me. Don't loiter."

"I had it in mind," Billy Hackett said scathingly, "to stop off the way an' bowl a game of ninepins."

The brick-and-stone house of the late Azarias Bibbs sat forlornly on the crest of its little knoll, its white chimney pots gleaming in the moonlight, its long front lawn extending like a roll of dark velvet down to the river. Like a mausoleum. Mr. Ryecroft wondered what worm got into the brain of man that caused him to erect so permanent a vanity for what must needs be such a temporary existence. The desires of humanity were quite different back in Wolf Scalp. As he took the pebbled path across the yard he noticed a light in Mr. Bibbs' study. Someone was there before him.

He ascended the shallow steps, crossed the veranda, and dropped the brass knocker on its escutcheon. Dr. Vanzart opened the door. There were lines of strain and bewilderment etched at the corners of the doctor's eyes. He said, "Why, it's you, sir! Did you get one, too?"

Mr. Ryecroft nodded, and pushed into the hall. He hadn't the slightest idea what it was all about. Bagley Bibbs came along the fine Flemish carpet, his hand outstretched in welcome. Mr. Ryecroft handed him his hat, said vaguely, "I don't mean to intrude but—"

Dr. Vanzart shot a glance at young Bibbs. "He got one, too, he says."

Bagley pondered a moment. "Maybe we'd better go back in the study and talk this over a bit?"

"A very sensible idea," Mr. Ryecroft agreed. "But first I'd like to go upstairs a moment to the master bedroom. On my visit yesterday evening I seem to have mislaid my—" He fumbled for words, looked apologetic. He gave them an encompassing smile, herded them to the newelpost, said, "After you, gentlemen." They climbed the steps; everyone, including Mr. Ryecroft, seemed considerably befuddled.

The smell of medicine and death still hung in Azarias Bibbs' bedroom. Bagley lighted the candelabrum. The carafe and tumbler were still on the taboret, the crumpled balls of paper on the carpet. Mr. Ryecroft picked one up and examined it; it was covered with indecipherable quill-scrawls. The furniture, he noted, was arranged precisely as it had been on his last visit. He walked to the window, gazed out into the yard. He was looking in the direction of Woodside Cemetery but the treetops just outside the window sash cut off his view. Bagley asked, "Do you see it? I mean whatever it was you mislaid?"

"It must have been misplaced when they removed the body," Mr. Ryecroft declared. "I don't seem to be able to—"

"If it was here when the body was taken out it's here now," Dr. Vanzart announced. "Nothing's been changed."

Mr. Ryecroft said politely, "I'm sorry to have troubled you. Shall we repair to the study?"

THE whale-oil lamp was burning smokily and mellowly in Azarias Bibbs' study and Mr. Ryecroft, surrounded by books and the accoutrements of a man of letters, felt suddenly rested and at ease. Bagley had brought in comfortable chairs and everyone relaxed. Dr. Vanzart produced a long-stemmed church warden from a rosewood rack and Bagley struck fire to a cigar. Mr. Ryecroft, a gentleman among gentlemen, revealed his tortoise shell snuffbox and took a pinch of snuff.

After a few experimental puffs, Dr. Vanzart said, "Bagley, you know, there's something funny about this man Ryecroft." He spoke as though Mr. Ryecroft were in China.

Bagley said enthusiastically, "Isn't there, though! Perhaps that's why I like him." He

Sheriff Zopkan drew a horse pistol from his bulging waist. "Don't nobuddy break into no canter. Who killed who?"

turned to Mr. Ryecroft. "So you got one, too? I wonder how many more?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about." Mr. Ryecroft listened for the sheriff.

"I received a note," Dr. Vanzart remarked, "stating that if I'd come here tonight I'd learn something to my advantage. Bagley received a similar note. Furthermore, I understand you to say that you also—"

"Fiddlesticks," Mr. Ryecroft said simply. "I came here to solve a murder."

Mr. Bagley Bibbs beamed on him in undisguised admiration. "So you've snagged the fellow who killed Captain Falconer!"

"Yes. And to explain the unique death of your father, who, I believe we'll find, expired from poison. Don't interrupt, Doctor. I could be wrong, of course, but we shall see what we shall see. A ring of thieves, headed by a very brilliant man, has been functioning here in Dandridge. Captain Falconer discovered this and was slain. Azarias Bibbs was killed for the same reason."

They heard the front door open, and the sound of footsteps in the hall. Sheriff Zopkan and Billy Hackett entered the room. Mr. Ryecroft wiped his forehead with his cuff, said, "Believe me, Sheriff, I'm glad to see you. This is a new experience for me, sitting face to face with a vicious killer."

Sheriff Zopkan's huge weathered face moved not a muscle. He drew a horse-pistol from his bulging waist. "Don't nobuddy break into no canter. Who killed who?"

"Dr. Vanzart's your man, Sheriff. Or perhaps we'd best call him by his real name—Mark Dinsmore."

Dr. Vanzart sat rigidly forward, laid down his pipe. "What nonsense is this, sir?"

"It seemed like diabolic nonsense to me, too," Mr. Ryecroft asserted, "until I struck the keystone, the dueling pistols. Then the whole terrible thing seemed to clarify itself. The question was: Why should a man named Mark Dinsmore come into the hinterlands ostensibly on a mission of selling valuable clocks, *and bring his dueling pistols, a family heirloom, along with him?* Dueling pistols are not traveling weapons. Why didn't he leave them at home? The answer is because he never intended to return home."

Dr. Vanzart's pale face was stony. Sheriff Zopkan asked, "Who'd he kill, and why?"

"This man, Mark Dinsmore," Mr. Ryecroft explained, "came down the Ohio River with a shipment of clocks. Before he left New York he'd made his decision to steal them. When he reached Cincinnati, and saw that it, too, was the terminal of an inland canal, he expanded his larcenous scheme. It was an ideal arrangement for the theft and trans-shipment of still other merchandise. He then stored his clocks, came north along the canal looking for a suitable headquarters and likely assistants. He became acquainted with Striker Fye, Sheriff, your red-haired cousin, and a man known as Rodney. Thus the corporation of thieves was joined."

"Cousin Striker Fye," the sheriff said with relish. "Am I really goin' to git him fer somethin'?"

"Ah, yes. Yes, indeed." Mr. Ryecroft beamed at Billy Hackett. "We caught him at an open grave tonight and have located the thieves' storeroom in the old powder magazine under the Red Buck Inn. Fye and Rodney among their other unpleasant duties worked the Cincinnati end of the plan. In the meantime, Dinsmore stayed at the Red Buck Inn, palming himself off as a doctor. He actually assumed the role of Azarias Bibbs' physician and advisor. He had access to Azarias' strongbox here, and evidently helped himself. So, anyway, it appears from your father's records, Mr. Bagley."

Billy Hackett asked, "This the feller that killed Captain Falconer?"

"Yes, Billy," Mr. Ryecroft answered patiently. "Dinsmore, always ready to pick up a few pennies, sold the pistols to Azarias. He swore to ownership, ascribed to a bill of sale using the name Vanzart. Captain Falconer, like myself, recognized the coat of arms. For some time, no doubt, he'd had reason to be suspicious of this so-called Vanzart. The courtyard was just outside his window and no doubt, too, he'd observed suspicious goings-on at the rear of the shop of Fye and Company—with the doctor himself evincing an unusual interest in Mr. Fye's activities. Two nights ago, while they were stowing away a shipment of merchandise stolen from a Mr. Potter, the captain stepped from his window into the court and investigated. He prowled the back of Fye's shop, located a case of Sheffield ax-heads, and being extremely dubious as to just what was coming off, took a couple back with him to hold as exhibits. He encountered Dinsmore, said something like, 'You're just the man I want to talk to, sir,' questioned him about the ax-heads, about Fye and Company—and about the Dinsmore dueling pistols. Dinsmore shot him. I found these ax-heads, two of them, in the captain's pockets as he lay on his deathbed. Samples from those now hidden in the powder magazine—"

DINSMORE'S thin mouth was harsh, taut.

"Why was my father killed?" Bagley asked quietly.

"Falconer's death got him to thinking about this new friend of his, this charming Dr. Vanzart. And when Azarias got to thinking, he checked over his accounts. He discovered defalcations—sizable embezzlements. He approached Dinsmore, accusing him, and shortly became ill. He had good grounds to believe he was being poisoned, but he was afraid to say as much, so he wrote you that cryptic treason note. I imagine he thought you, as a herbalist, might cure him. As I say, he had no actual proof that his sickness might not be entirely natural."

Sheriff Zopkan said grimly, "Well the folks back in New York can identify Dinsmore. In the meantime, I'll pick up Striker Fye an' his sidekick Rodney. Mebbe if I was to scare 'em right bad they'd tell a interesting story. I guess that'll about fix ever'thing up. The boy, here, Billy, says you caught 'em robbin' Mr. Azarias' grave tonight!"

"No." Mr. Ryecroft shook his head.

Billy Hackett spluttered. "But John, we seen—"

"They weren't robbing Mr. Bibbs' grave, they were putting his body to rest. He'd only been dead a short time and they—"

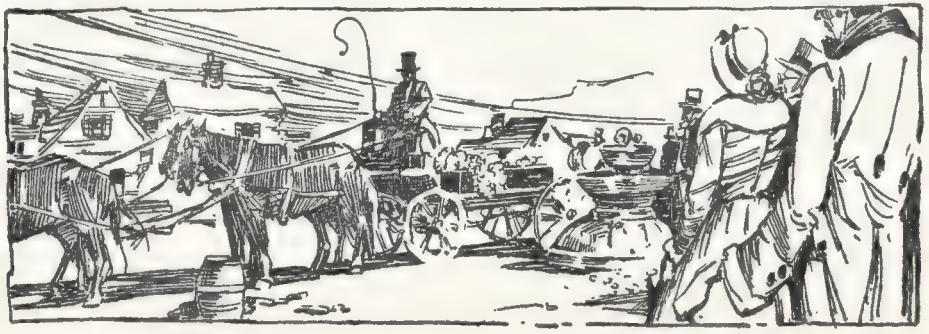
"Are you out of your head?" Dr. Vanzart sneered. "Don't you remember he died last night, twenty-four hours ago!"

"That's the strangest part of the whole affair," Mr. Ryecroft answered. "Here you showed the same twisted intelligence you demonstrated last night on Stable Street when you set your footpads on me. Let me tell you about the extraordinary death of Azarias Bibbs. Last evening, after my visit here, you came into Mr. Bibbs' bedroom and picked up a crumpled paper from the floor. Thereon you saw a half-finished draft for twenty thousand dollars, payable to Bagley Bibbs. Now, let me get out my almanac so we make no mistake about dates, since dates are very important here." He produced his dog-eared almanac. "Yesterday was April 25th, today is the 26th. Just one day and yet it means so much. It meant imprisonment for you—or death for Azarias Bibbs."

Bagley said, "I don't see—"

"When your father wrote out that draft," Mr. Roycroft declared, "he sealed his death warrant. Dinsmore was frantic. The passage of such a large sum through your father's accounts would reveal Dinsmore's defalcations. So he killed your father, not actually, but nominally. He immediately put out the story that your father was dead. The announcement of a man's death instantly freezes his finances. Those moneys are, from that instant, the property of his estate." He turned to Dinsmore. "You moved him from this house to the shop of Fye and Company, didn't you? Not last night, as you told me, but early this morning. Last night he spent here in the master bed-

(Continued on page 146)



BUZZ *vs.* RATTLE

By H. M. CASTLE

Old Pard Van Sales
Was hard as nails,
And swore he'd far exceed
The span of years
That man appears
To live by choice or need.
But tho' he throve,
By Joe, he drove
His luck a bit too much,
And kicked awake
A wicked snake
That rattled at his touch.
He paled with fright,
But flailed by spite
The angry serpent struck,
And loosed its ire
In juiced-up fire
Before Old Pard could duck.
Aware he'd die
With stare in eye,
The old guy sought a spot
Where deep in peace
He'd sleep, and cease
To care where he should rot.
But Fate was there
In wait to spare
This human's mortal hide—
A skeeter band,
With meat at hand,
Attacked from every side.
They drank him dry
Then sank to lie,
As Pard was stricken dumb;
He gazed around,
While dazed with sound
Of dying skeeters' hum.
Somehow, pell mell,
He now felt well—
The lethal dose instead
Had filled their veins
And stilled their brains
And killed the varmints dead!

DECORATION BY PETER KUHLHOFF

BALDY SOURS AND THE

NOW take this atom bomb. It just goes to show how science uplifts mankind. Ever since the human race was exposed to civilization some long-haired hombres have been fixin' to abolish same.

Like when Ole Man Colt figgered out the six-shooter—he just multiplied sudden death. An' then this man, Winchester, comes along with a smoke pole which if a jasper don't write your ticket the first shot he's got fourteen more chances to blow out your light.

What I mean, there's just the quick an' the dead.

Talk about civilization. By instinct, we ain't two jumps ahead of them bozos who done their courtin' with a club. The only reason a man don't use a stone hatchet any more is bombs get more at a lick. They tell me we sprung from monkeys. Well, a monkey can hang by its tail, which a lot of jiggers I know would be doin' the same if they had the equipment.

Life is a funny proposition. A man comes into this world protestin' to beat hell, an' he departs the same way. Take me an' Texas Joe's simple pardner, Sampson Sebastian Sours, more frequent knowed as "Baldy." When that ole ranahan lets go his tail-holt on

MIGHTY ATOM

One of them high lines busts loose, there's a blue flash an' the desert lights up like Death Valley at noontime. A ball of fire comes down the bench an' I see two of them old desert rats an' a mess of jackrabbits runnin' neck an' neck.

By CHARLES W. TYLER

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE WERT

life there's goin' to be a turrible commotion.

Baldy ain't got nothin' onto the outside of his skull, an' just twice as much inside, which is how come the entire Mojave Desert is practically laid waste.

It all begun when Baldy commenced wrestlin' with this atom thing.

All I sabe about an atom is that Baldy's brain is one, an' all he's got to do is mingle with his brother man a few minutes an' somebody's tryin' to split it.

Me an' Texas Joe an' Baldy is three ole-time cow pokes what partook in the winnin' of the West. We maintain tradition by keepin' just one jump ahead of the sheriff, which is the only reason we ain't hung in our prime.

For the last two-three years we been ridin' for Ole Man Kreeper's Straddle K outfit out here in the Mojave. An' now an' then we slope into Buzzard for a little festivity.

Before the war Buzzard was a ghost town. A ghost town is where they take the census by countin' the tombstones. Any other inhabitants is looked on as fugertives from a bughouse an' not worth tallyin'.

Buzzard is the seat of ignorance in the Mojave Desert up to recent, bein' mostly infested with a few desert rats an' Ole Lady Gibb, who survived the late departed Casket Charley. I guess you'd say he made his escape, on account of this woman is one of them strong-minded females, which a man would do better argifyin' with a run-away enjine on the Santa Fe.

Ole Lady Gibb is a big, rangy female, with freckles, which make her look like she's been left out in the wet an' mildewed. Her hair is sorta gorgrum gray, an' done up in a pug, like a cupola on a barn. She's got some fuzz on her top lip an' four-five bristles on her chin. I mean you couldn't miss her.

She runs the general store in Buzzard, an' her wickiup is headquarters for a lot of ole desert rats. She used to grubstake a prospector now an' then, thereby accumerlatin' a first mortgage on some holes in the ground that don't pay off in nothin' but whiskers an' ore samples.

The whiskers is on them desert rats, an' the ore samples is piled on a shelf in front of Ole Lady Gibb's store. The ore samples was kinda pretty, an' once in a while she'd palm a few off on some dudes.

Anyhow, Buzzard was nice an' peaceful, with vultures siftin' around in the sky daytimes an' the wind rattlin' the pickets in the graveyard fence nights, which it sounds like footsteps approachin'.

Even when this man Hitler starts blotchin' brands over acrost the Big Deep it don't scarcely cause a ripple in Buzzard, on account when anybody mentions the war them desert rats think it's the Civil War.

Well, one day word come that the Japs are on the war path, an' directly some Governmunt jaspers show up from the Bureau of Mines, I think it was. They look at them ore samples out there, an' practical immejut things begin to function the same as when one of them desert rats winds up the commencer on his flivver.

Neighbor, there is a commotion.

OLE MAN TIMES, who used to run a newspaper in Randsburg, California, claims the Mojave Desert is the chemical laboratory of the world. Bein' a simple cow poke, I wouldn't know about that, but it is sure amazin' what-all these whiskered ole side-hill gougers uncover here an' yon.

Like I say, the only atom I know about for sure is me an' Texas Joe's dim-wit pardner, Baldy Sours, but I hear tell this here Mojave country contains atom elements, like the one Baldy turns loose on Buzzard. But I'm comin' to that.

Anyhow, it develops that them ore specimens in front of Ole Lady Gibb's store include a lot of minerals required in the war effort.

Just as quick as she hears that, Ole Lady Gibb hollers, "I'm rich!" an' she kisses Titterin' Tight in the middle of his brush, scarin' out two scorpions.

Well, from then on Buzzard waxes prosperous. She starts with a boom, an' she ends with a boom. Period.

I guess you been readin' about the romance of the West—how a handsome cowboy chases off badmen an' wins a bootiful gal, an' they settle down an' live happy, for a spell, anyhow. Me, I snicker.

It ain't that I'm ag'in wedlock, but when a baldheaded ole coot like Baldy Sours, who spent his life singin' cows to sleep, begins to honey up to a female gomodon with hair on her chin I claim there ought to be a law.

Like I say, me an' Texas Joe an' Baldy, we mog into Buzzard now an' then, an' we get a whole pile accumerlated to Ole Lady Gibb. In fact, there is times when it looks like if we get out of town alive it will be a miracle. Baldy an' her are pizen.

But just as quick as Baldy gets wind that the ole gal is in the money he buries the hatchet, an' starts to spark her. You see what I mean.

"You'd make a stunnin' couple," I says to Baldy.

"They shore would," opines Texas Joe, who skirts women like a yearlin' avoids a pack of wolves. "They both must ha' been dropped on their heads at birth an' they been stunned ever sinst."

"It ain't her money," Baldy says, lickin' his chops. "I love Clemytine fer her ownse'f. Anyhow, I ain't as young as I used to was, an' a man has got to think of his future."

"You git hitched to that ole catamount," Texas Joe says, "an' you ain't got any more future than a Chinaman two days dead."

Well, we argify it, pro an' contrary, but it ain't no use. Baldy has got a one-track mind with an empty train runnin' on it. Talkin' to that hoot-nanny is just like holdin' a conversation with a noon whistle—no matter what you say it's still quittin' time.

The worst of it was, Ole Lady Gibb recuperates his affection. She falls for Baldy all of a sudden like a man bulldoggin' a longhorn steer. I find out later that Baldy tells her he had put a lot of money in a bank in Las Vegas. He sure did—a faro bank.

Bein' it was on the railroad, Buzzard become the center of activity thereabouts, the same as a chuck waggin on roundup. They build a powder magazine in the box canyon back of town, an' put in an earth dam up above for a water supply. The empty buildin's is fixed up for folks to live in, along with some bunkhouses.

In addition to the spur track by the cattle pens, the railroad lays a side track an' builds a grade crossin', an' trains whistle for Buzzard just like it's Salt Lake City.

The power line from Boulder Dam crosses the bench where the town is located, an' they hook up electric lights, the same as they got in San Berdoo. Ole Lady Gibb buys a second-hand radio an' advertises for a washin' machine.

You talk about modern—they even pipe water into the toilets.

What I'm gettin' at—Buzzard become civilized galore. The boys don't wear shootin' irons exposed any more—they tote 'em inside their shirts. Just in case.

To show you how Buzzard responds to culture, in scarcely no time automobiles start runnin' over folks, four cocktail parlors open up, they got a black market, countyfit gas coopons an' have to build an addition onto the jail.

When Buzzard was a-leadin' the simple life, you could trust a man. Mebbe that was because nobody had nothin' that was worth stealin'. I dunno. But now when a jasper wants to shake hands, you better start figgerin' what kind of capers he's goin' to pull with the hand he's got behind his back.

They tell me some folks call it diplomacy, but where I come from they term it bushwhack.

WELL, things drift along two-three years. By now Buzzard is just as refined as any place. They got bookmakers, jitterbugs an' two missionaries.

Ole Lady Gibb has got so much money she starts cannin' it, the same as pickles. Baldy tells me an' Texas Joe she has got it stowed away with the preserves in the root cellar on the slope behind the store. He's plumb worried somebody will steal it, an' that will be the end of a lovely romance.

So Baldy start figgerin' out a scheme.

An' now we come to this atom business.

One evenin' in the early part of August, Ole Lady Gibb's radio starts blattin' about how a place called Hurryshima, or somethin', gets blowed all to hell with a thing called a atom bomb.

The store is full of folks. Ole Man Kreeper had trailed in some feeders we're goin' to load in the mornin', an' there's cowboys an' desert rats an' a couple Governmunt fellers, an' everybody commences to throw talk.

"Whut's a Adam bumb, fer Gawd's sake?" says Deaf Dowdle, who can hear good on the radio, but everybody else has got to yell at 'im.

"Didn' ye never hear tell o' Adam?" hollers Titterin' Tight. "He married Gardenia Edum, here a spell back, an' they raised Cain."

"The man didn't say Adam, ye ole badger," says Gummy McCarty, pattin' the floor with his wooden leg. "He says *atom*."

"Shorely," says Jake Blouse. "Up an' at 'em."

"'Tain't no sich thing," says Zabriskie Sack, who got eddicated when he was guidin' a college perfessor in Death Valley one summer. "A atom is like a molecule, only it's got more teeth."

"A m-molecule is a muh-huh-muh-huh-muh-mole w-when its leetle," says Twitter Burke, who has got a implement in his vocal pianner. "H-how could a muh-huh-muh-huh-muh-mole b-blow up ahuh-ahuh-ahuh . . . Aw, to hell with it!"

"Harh? What ye say?" says Deaf Dowdle, cuppin' his ear.

"Fer gosh sake, don't git that hiccupin' ole t'rant'ler started ag'in," says Jake Blouse, "or the war will be over."

"I kin explain everythin'," says Ole Man Sack, wantin' to air his l'arnin', I guess. "A atom is like when a screw fly blows a sore on a cow critter an' she gits screw worms. It starts with nothin' an' multiplies until hell won't have it."

"Wait a minute," says Dooman Needy, who don't ketch onto things handy. "They drop a screw fly on Japan, an' a cow gits atoms, which makes her multiply. I don't see the sense in that."

"They ain't any," growls Ole Man Kreeper, "any more than they is in that knothaid o' your'n."

Texas Joe rolls his eyes an' says, "I jest know they ain't no good goin' to come out of all this."

Just then one of the Governmunt fellers says, "Let's put it this way, gentlemen. All matter consists of atoms. Let's compare them

to grains of powder. One grain, once it has been activated by a spark, sets off other grains and there is an explosion. In the case of the atomic bomb, a tiny neutron is shot into the nucleus of a uranium atom. The atom breaks into two parts. These two parts, in turn, are broken and the neutrons explode four more atoms, and so on."

"Jest as clear as mud," says Gummy McCarty.

"And so," says the governmunt feller, "once the power of these uranium atoms has been released they explode with terrific force."

"That's the trouble with you damn Republicans," hollers Deaf Dowdle. "Ye blame everythin' on Roosevelt."

"Who said anythin' about Roosevelt, ye deaf ole fool?" shrills Titterin' Tight. "We was talkin' about geraniums."

"I am, am I?" screeches Ole Man Dowdle. An' he jumps up an' wants to fight.

An' they talk about lastin' peace!

Anyhow, just then me an' Texas Joe's simple pardner, Baldy, come in. Under his arm he has got a box with some holes an' a lid on it. You could tell by lookin' at him that he has got somethin' up his sleeve, an' it wa'n't just his elbow.

I GUESS you know about moonshine. You put some mash together an' wait for it to work. That's just like this man, Sours. When he gets somethin' in his old bald coop it lays there until it commences to ferment. After that it's every man for himself.

A gent named Stinky Flowers runs a gas station down on the highway, an' he's got a lot of cages there with different kinds of animals in 'em for toorists to look at.

Well, we find out later that Baldy trades Stinky out of a pet skunk for a horse hair mecarte.

Now a skunk is all right in its place, I guess, but not in perlite sassiety, or even in Ole Lady Gibb's store.

So here comes that bowlegged idjit with this here skunk, which its name was "Atomizer." He sets the box down on the counter. "Look what I brang yuh, cutie," he says to Ole Lady Gibb. An' he smirks like syrup runnin' out of a jug.

"Fer me?" simmers Ole Lady Gibb. "A present? Ain't ye the ole cut-up?"

Baldy takes off the lid, lookin' around as proud as a man can who ain't got a brain in his head.

"Her name is Atomizer," Baldy says.

"Jest whut we was talkin' about," says Titterin' Tight.

"Perfoom?" inquires Ole Lady Gibb. An' she cranes her neck for a look, like a dude investigatin' Ole Faithful Geezer. Then she sees this black thing in the box with a white stripe down its back, an' her an' a bugle was a pair.

"Git that damn poleket out of here!" she screeches, givin' the box a shove.

Baldy makes a wild grab, but he jest catches this critter by the tail, which it h'ist up convenient, an' he waves her around. He claims its detonator has been removed, an' that Atomizer is just as harmless as goin' to church. But any hombre who has ever got involved with a poleket is bound to be a whole pile skeptical, an' he shies off from minglin' around whereat this sachet kitty stakes a claim.

You'd think a man with a peg leg couldn't function so good, but Gummy McCarty ain't retarded a little bit. He sets down his post on Twitter Burke's foot an' vaults just like a seven-year locust.

Dooman Needy, who is practically bed-ridden from his rheumatiz, lays aside his misery an' vacates the premises. They tell me skunk oil is good for stiff joints, an' I recommend it highly.

Texas Joe heaves up from this cracker box where he's sittin', an' him an' a churn agitate their apparatus in the same manner. "This is the last straw," he bleats. "Me an' that loco ole wampus are complete strangers. From now on."

Twitter Burke dips into his vocabulary, an' he ain't got any more stutters than a meader lark.

Ole Lady Gibb used to have a screen door on her emporium, but that was before Jake Blouse starts wearin' it for a halter.

I mean, jet propulsion has arrived in Buzzard. This here wood pussy has got the elements an' them ole desert rats have got the propellers.

Baldy was the last man out of the chute. Just to make it a clean sweep, Ole Lady Gibb fetches up the rear, takin' swipes at 'im with a new broom.

The way I hear it, holdin' a skunk by the tail put her in neutral. Anyhow, everythin' smells normal until Baldy trips. He loses possession of this here liquid cat for a minute, an' what-all unfolds ain't atmosphere.

"The only clothes I got," croaks Baldy, jumpin' up an' throwin' a grab at this critter's tail, "an' I got to bury 'em."

"Yes, ye bow-laiged ape," screams Ole Lady Gibb, windin' the broom around his ears. "An' you'll be in 'em!"

LOVE is like that. Here today an' Reno tomorrer.

Me, I shudder. What a man will do for money. I sabe now why they say Casket Charley went to his last reward. He got compensation when he took his departure from Ole Lady Gibb.

An' here comes Baldy, wantin' to hoe the widder's weeds.

Well, it looks like it's all over between Baldy an' Ole Lady Gibb, but you never can tell.

A man carryin' a skunk by the tail is sure of one thing—he ain't goin' to have no company where he's goin'. All the folks who head for Ole Lady Gibb's place when the rumpus starts, they pick up their treadles an' pat the ground in more directions than there is accommodations.

Snuffy Baggs, the local badge-toter, comes boundin' out of the pokey, an' I guess he can't make up his mind whether to shoot Baldy or the skunk. He waves his lead-pusher, an' claims Baldy is under arrest for maintainin' a nuisance, violatin' the board of health laws an' bein' a fugertive from justice.

Baldy, he throws on more coal, circles the flag pole twice an' bears away between Bolliver's saloon an' a honky-tonk.

Me an' Texas Joe start out to round up our simple pardner, on account of we're supposed to relieve punchers comin' off herd at midnight. We jest foller our noses, an' we find this man, Sours, of all places, out back of Ole Lady Gibb's store.

You heard, I guess, how money is the root of evil—well, Ole Lady Gibb's root cellar is where it sprouts.

It appears that some robbers was on the point of bustin' into this here root cellar, but they get wind of Baldy an' hightail. Ole Lady Gibb hears voices, an' she comes a-runnin'. When she sees how them hombres pried the padlock off the door an' finds out Baldy scared 'em away, she regrets, I guess, bustin' the broom over his head, because brooms cost a dollar four bits in Buzzard, an' are hard to get.

"Ye pore dear," Ole Lady Gibb says. "An' when I think them damn crooks might've kilt you."

It would have been a blessin'.

"What in hell are you hangin' onto that poleket fer?" Texas Joe says.

"It's a secrut," Baldy says.

"A man projectin' around with a skunk by the tail," Texas Joe says, "ain't got no more secruts than a barnyard."

Anyhow, it appears that Baldy figgers it out that if Ole Lady Gibb put a skunk in this here root cellar it would make a swell watchman, an' any thiefs who bust in would bust right out ag'in. Then all Snuffy Baggs'd have to do is go around an' smell everybody in Buzzard.

How you goin' to beat a dream like that?

"That's why I brang yuh Atomizer," Baldy tells Ole Lady Gibb. "You seen how it worked in the store."

He claims, ordinary, she is just as tame as kissin' yore mother-in-law, an' would get to know Ole Lady Gibb the same as a relative.

You want to know where this atom bomb come in? Gentlemen, hark!

When Ole Lady Gibb subscribes to me an' Texas Joe's simple pardner, Sampson Sebastian Sours' notion, an' corrals that sachet bag in her root cellar, it was jest like the gent in the store says. You shoot a newtron dingus into the muscle of this atom thing, an' then hold your hat.

You ain't goin' to believe it.

Neighbor, you read the papers. In August, 1945, it rained in Los Angulus. An' when it

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rains in Southern California in August somethin's the matter.

They had a typhoon in Tokyo after they dropped them atom bombs. Catch on?

Anyhow, we fix another padlock on the door of the root cellar an' deposite Atomizer in Ole Lady Gibb's bank; then me an' Texas Joe take Baldy down to the waterin' trough beside the railroad corral to renovate him a few.

He disrobes, an' we put him to soak. I go back to town to get him some new Levis an' a shirt.

Meantime, a freight comes along, an' they set off a car with a hot box. The telegraft operator puts some red lanterns around it, an' tells Texas Joe it's a carload of ammunition.

Ole Man Kreeper rides out to the chuck waggin, where this here Straddle K stuff is bedded down, an' the moon comes over the mountain, an' the night wind wafts a breeze fragrant with the smell of sage an' skunk essence, an' everythin' is as lovely as Saturday night in Las Vegas.

Baldy is a-roostin' on the top rail of one of the loadin' corrals, just as dainty as a picked rooster, an' me an' Texas Joe, we roll a cigareet an' hunker down, meditatin' on what a stunnin' age we're livin' in, now that they got this atom business by the tail.

"The world do move," opines Texas Joe.

"She do," I says.

An' she did.

It starts with some howls. Then Ole Lady Gibb comes in. You could've heard her in Tulsa on a clear night. Then the shootin' begins. Final there is a clap of thunder, a gush of wind, the ground shakes, all outdoors lights up, an' it starts rainin' rocks.

Me an' Texas an' Baldy seek shelter, an' Texas says, "Mebbe it's a atom."

"It could be," I says. "We been hossin' around with it."

What-all unfolds, you'd be alarmed. Me, I just pick up a few pieces here an' there, like they been a-doin' in the Mojave Desert ever sinst.

It seems like them robbers figger there won't be nobody lookin' for 'em to come back right off; so they jest wait until things quiet down an' then go back an' bust into the root cellar. I guess this here skunk was about half-mad to begin with, an' she resents these orejanas rompin' into her preserves.

When Stinky Flowers brands her Atomizer, he ain't exaggeratin'.

Well, the way it looks, them robbers go 'round an' 'round, an' where they stop nobody knows. Ole Lady Gibb muscles onto a .45-70 Springfield, which she's got in her wicki-up, an' swarms forth. Snuffy Baggs comes around the bend with a .50-95 Winchester Express.

I guess they figgered what they was shootin' at was them thiefs, but somebody put a bullet into the powder magazine up the canyon. They is echoes boundin' from crag to crag out in the Mojave Desert even now. Some night when you're drivin' U. S. Highway 91 you stop an' lissen.

They tell me that hombres who died in Buzzard as far back as 1881 riz up from their graves an' peered through the picket fence around the graveyard.

When the rocks quit fallin', me an' Texas Joe an' Baldy crawl out from under this car with the red lanterns around it, an' we are complete edified.

"I bet that was just as good as when them jiggers exploded that atom over 'round Alamogordo, New Mex," Texas Joe says.

"Did a atom make that hole in the ground out to Winslow, Arizona?" Baldy says.

"It could be," Texas Joe reckons. "I wouldn't put it beyond 'em."

'I 'low me an' Clemytine git hitched most any day now," Baldy says, kinda standin' there in a transom.

Just then we hear a roar like a gully washer.

"Holy cow!" says Texas Joe. "The dam has let go!"

THE telegraft operator has come out of his hogan, an' he stands there a minute; then starts down the railroad. I hear he went through Victorville like the second section of the Santa Fe Chief.

Now when the dam busts, it seems, the water undercut the foundation of one of them high-tension towers that carry them power lines from Boulder. They pass right over the corrals.

They ain't wire, like they look, a-tall, but hollow cable an inch 'n a quarter through, an' what they're packin' ain't soothin' syrup.

Baldy opines the flood will miss Buzzard, bein' it's up there on the bench.

"Yare," says Texas Joe, "but it won't miss us." An' he heads for his hoss.

'We can go in the telegraft office," Baldy says, bright as a dollar watch, "an' shut the door."

INSURE THE PEACE
BUY BONDS!

Just then the first one of them high lines busts loose. There's a blue flash an' the desert lights up like noontime in Death Valley. A ball of fire comes, down the bench, an' I seen two of them ole desert rats an' a mess of jackrabbits runnin' neck an' neck.

Baldy runs behind the loadin' chute, yipperin', "Where in hell did yuh put them Levis?"

All at once, I remember Texas Joe says this here freight car is full of ammunition. If one of them high lines falls on it, it's goin' to be shockin'. Me, I am just as calm, an' if I'm collected it ain't goin' to be in this neighborhood.

My hoss is up here a piece, an' I'm a-headin' that way steadfast when I collide with the Sours' fambly skeleton. We sog an' bounce.

"Why don't you go where yo're lookin'?" whinnies Baldy, pickin' up his remains.

"I know where I'm goin'," I says, "an' it ain't no place you can see with the nakid eye."

Along about here another one of them high lines lets loose, an' it snakes around, bangin' an' poppin' an' settin' the sagebrush afire. But when it hits the railroad track beside that ammunition car an' starts burnin' up steel rails I figger if I get out of this scrape I will lead a better life.

This Straddle K herd out on the flats roll their trails, an' it looks like they will arrive in Los Angulus, or some place, ahead of fast freight. You could hear Ole Man Kreeper broadcastin' from here to Laramie. I mean he has got him a stampede.

There is a roarin' up the gulch, the sound of boulders boundin' along an' another live wire pops right in the middle of some buildin's on the outskirts of Buzzard, startin' a fire.

I regret we don't let that atom lay.

Baldy heads for his hoss, but the bronc's taken a look at this boneyard caperin' down the line, an' it puts out to go. But it don't matter. You take even a bow-lagged hombre an' turn him loose handy to forty tons of shot an' shell that is due to let go any second, an' a hoss would just impede his progress.

This man, Sours, is what you might term streamlined. He bows out his chest an' pulls in his stummick an' starts pushin' on the ground with his git-alongs.

Me, the only thing I require is just one tail-feather an' a mallet duck has got him a twin brother.

I draw a bead on the Funeral Mountains, an' I would've been there sooner, only jest then that carload of ammunition explodes an' I am knocked flat.

That ain't all. What they got in that car I wouldn't know, but when me an' Texas Joe an' Baldy pass Furnace Crick two hours later they're still shootin' at us.

I'm cured.

They can do what they want with this atom business, but from now out I ain't monkeyin' with nothin' but jest cows.

For a while Baldy figgers some on goin' back to Buzzard an' enterin' into wedlock with Ole Lady Gibb, but one day we meet up with Stinky Flowers in Twin Falls, Idaho, an' he says the root cellar went down the canyon when the dam went out, an' Baldy would be just as safe in Buzzard as a man who was goin' to be hanged in the mornin'.

The Man at the Throttle Was

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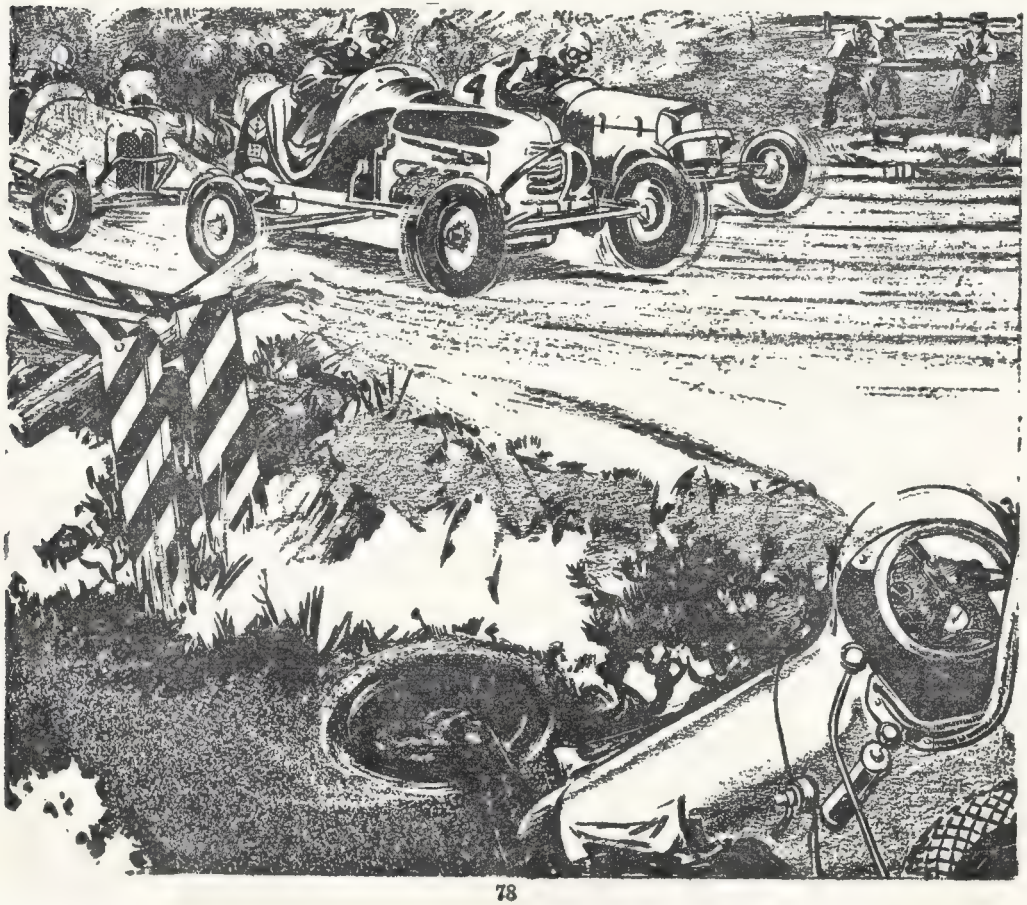
ILLUSTRATED BY ROGER THOMAS

INDIANAPOLIS

AS A QUALIFIED bachelor—and who is a better judge?—I've always maintained that women are a nuisance around a racetrack. You can take a nicely functioning organization composed of eighteen parts of midget race-cars and eighteen parts of drivers, that is clicking it off like a set of matched rear end gears and then you toss in one or two portions of female and what do you get? Right! It's just like throwing a castellated nut in the differential.

That's why I hollered my lungs out when the Association decided to allow wives to travel with the circuit. That was bad enough. But when they hired an unattached female for secretary, record-keeper and guardian of our forty percent of the gate receipts, and when the secretary turned out to be a slim, lovely



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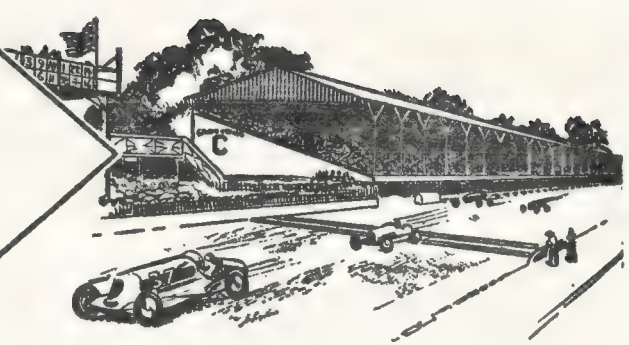
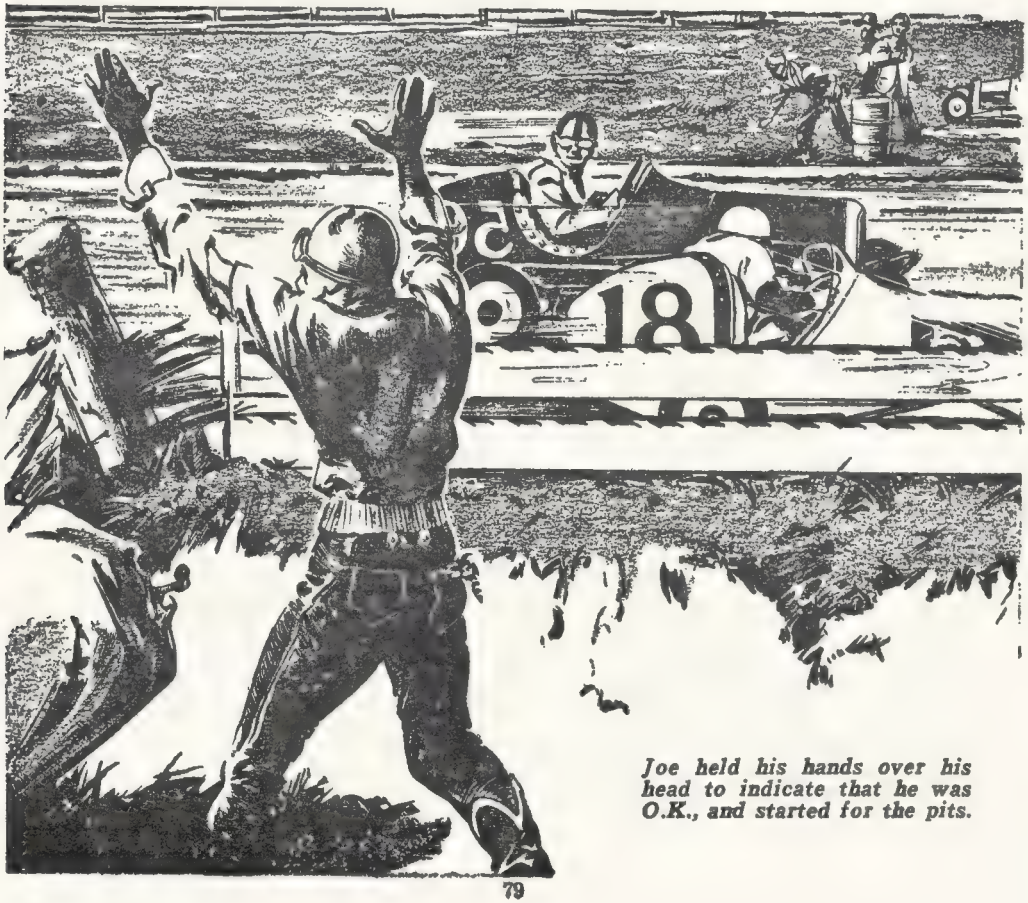


By
COLEMAN
MEYER

brunette with eyes that always seemed to be ribbing you, I knew we'd hired ourselves an atom bomb in high heels. They gave the job of looking for a secretary to our business manager, Charley Maker. Knowing Charley, I had my worst fears confirmed when Elise Blake showed up and I realized that Charley's chief concern, as always, wasn't how neat the records would look in the books but rather how



Joe held his hands over his head to indicate that he was O.K., and started for the pits.

We had two divorces and half a dozen fist fights in the first month Elise was with us.

neat the recordkeeper would look in tailored slacks.

I'll have to admit that Elise minded her own business and maybe it wasn't her fault that she had a complexion like a hand-rubbed lacquer job and teeth like a nice, even row of spark-plug porcelains. And her smiling, "Nice going!" after fifty dirty laps under the lights sometimes seemed more reward than the trophy.

All I know was that we had two divorces, half a dozen fist fights and every driver in the circuit in a mental lockslide in the first month she was with us.

Up to that time things had been going nicely in the Night Speedway Midget Racing Association. We ran five nights a week throughout California, the guys drove within the limits of their respective abilities, and you could win a race now and then without having to place your insurance company in jeopardy. Then, after it became her job to mark down the nightly box-score, every guy in the outfit drove like he was looking for a gold star. Winning even a stinking little heat became work, and to knock off a main event you had to keep your foot on the floor and your wheels right between the angels and the harps.

I guess I bought her as many cokes and as few Martinis as the next guy but after a couple of months it seemed as though little Joe Humphries had the pole position and that solved it for some of the group—the married ones at least. Anyhow, most of the feuding had tapered off when "Trip" Hammer joined the circuit.

That was a couple of months ago. Hammer—Ed was his first name and a press agent had done the rest—came with us to drive one of Jack Gallinatti's pigs and moved right into everything, a seat in Gallinatti's best midget and a stool right next to Elise at the cocktail bar. In three days he was telling Jack how to run his three car string, the pit-steward how to run the pit, the starter how to start them and Elise what a hot-shot he was. Part that made it bad was that he was about as good as they came in the racing business and *did* know most of the answers. He'd run at Indianapolis twice and that made him more or less of a head man in a bush league circuit.

He was a big guy, and loud; perhaps only slightly too big for the crowded cockpit of a midget race-car but definitely too loud for a business where you're together every night in the week. I didn't like him the first night and ten days association hadn't improved my opinion.

Trip knew that Elise went out with me occasionally and Joe frequently, and that Joe drove my other car. And, after he'd been inoculated by her eyes and ribbed a little by her smile, he took to pushing Joe around considerably and prodding me a little. I say "a little" as I don't prod too well.

Joe was different. He'd been doing a nice job in Number Five, Sassy Lassie, until Cupid caught him on the backstretch, and now Joe had his heart and his throttle foot all mixed up. Every time Elise smiled at something Trip said it knocked two seconds off Joe's lap time.

He was a shy, serious little kid with the slim, sensitive fingers of a pianist. Maybe those fingers would never coax a bit of Bach from a piano but they were rapidly learning to coax an extra half-second from a sliding, screaming race-car in a blistering five-man turn. And while they couldn't thread a difficult passage through eighty-eight keys they could thread a two-and-a-half-foot midget with eighty-eight horsepower through a two-foot hole. Joe lived racing twenty-four hours a day. He used a checkered flag for a pillow slip and had a stop-watch on his wristband and all he thought of was Indianapolis and May Day, two miles of brick and a two-hundred-mile-an-hour car. That was, of course, before Elise smiled and Cupid twanged.

Right now he was the picture of misery and his driving in the past ten days wouldn't have qualified him for a tow-car. I took a walk over to his pit, pulled up Lassie's hood and took a wholly unnecessary look at the engine. He was polishing his goggles.

"O.K., Jeff?" he asked, disinterest in his tone.

"Yeah. O.K." I nodded. "It's been O.K. for a couple of weeks. How about you?"

His eyes were downcast and he scuffed the dirt of the pit floor with his toe. "I don't know," he said, and shrugged. "I can't seem to get

going. Looks like I lost the combination. I—oh, hell! Jeff—you know what it is. Elise. . ."

BY THE standards of this business I'm a sere and yellowed ancient doddering from racemeet to racemeet. I'm twenty-seven. Something had to jolt him up a bit—soon.

"Look, Joe," I said, "in this business you'll meet a lot of women. They're all right, I guess, but when they start to ride the turns with you, you don't go far. I'm not thinking about women right now—that's something you'll have to sort out for yourself. It's business I'm thinking of. These cars are my business, and right now business is bad. What are we going to do about you?"

"I don't know, Jeff," he confessed miserably. "I'll snap out of it—I guess."

"You'll have to," I replied. "You want to make the finals, don't you? And you want a crack at an Indianapolis car, don't you? The only way you're going to get it is to buckle down and get back to driv—"

A booming voice interrupted and we both turned as Trip joined us. "Looks like you and me for the trophy dash, Dwyer," he said to me. He tossed in a dig for Joe with that big smile of his. "What's the matter with Junior here? Didn't he make the consolation event?"

Joe flushed hotly and started to reply but Hammer didn't give him a chance to get the words out. "We're out in a couple of minutes," he continued to me. "Come on out and get yourself a driving lesson."

The trophy dash was a three-lap affair for the two fastest qualifying cars. Hammer had hung up the best time and I was second, the first time we'd gotten together in a match event like this and one he'd been rather loudly waiting for. He had a hell of a good sled but I had three hundred competition hours in a midget and knew a few of the answers. Besides I was frying inside just a little. There aren't too many guys who like to give me driving lessons. There aren't any who tell me about it beforehand.

He had the pole. That left me with the outside, a poor spot if you don't know how to use it. We took the usual two laps for warm-up and crowd-stalling, came out of the corner high and fast. Then I pulled my foot off. The starter snatched back his little green flag and waved us on for another line-up lap. Trip's goggled head looked around to see where I was and I bent down inside the cockpit as though fooling with something.

He waited for me on the backstretch, head turned, and got so interested in waving for me to come into line that he forgot his business. I hadn't forgotten, though, and keep my clutch partly out and engine revving tightly although we were just crawling. We beetled up the stretch, out of the upper turn and then I saw what I was looking for—a thread of smoke starting from his exhaust stack.

Two hundred feet from the flag I jumped on my iron and it leaped like a frightened cat. Trip heard the bellow and automatically put his foot down. His box of bolts let go with a cloud of smoke, coughed on the charge from the accelerator pump and then we hit the line—even.

His engine was cleared by the time the flag finished whipping down but that stutter was all I had needed. We'd crossed the line even, but my engine was peaked and Trip was still on the way up.

I took him from a wide rail run, clipped across his grillework and hit the corner in a long, controlled slide. His nose was there, almost in my pocket, but I had my iron completely crossways with the front wheels riding right on the whitewashed fire hose that was the inner marker. The only way he could get through was with an acetylene cutting torch or an overslide on my part. Usually I don't overslide. And I didn't.

Trip's face had a chagrined look as we rolled to the pits. Elise was at my stall as I braked to a stop, a trim figure in nicely tailored brown slacks, record board on her arm.

"Nice going, Prof," she commented, laughing. "When is the next class?"

"He won't get caught on that one twice." I grinned. "But I know some others. Look—honey, what the hell do you see in a lug like that?"

Her eyes widened. "Why, Jeff Dwyer! I do believe you're jealous."

"Jealous, nothing!" I snorted. "But with a lot of nice kids around like Joe you waste your time with a phony. . ."

"Jeff! You darling old Beatrice Fairfax," she mocked. You're so understanding of my problems. . ." That impish light was in her eyes and she was gone, blowing me a saucy kiss.

"Aw—" was the best I could achieve at the slim perfection of her retreating back.

JOE and Trip drew a pairing together for the next heat coming up with four slower cars, and it came close to being murder both literally and figuratively. I knew something was going to happen the moment the flag dropped. Joe had the pole and, probably due to the fact that Trip was alongside, awoke from his racing trance. It was a hot start and I took one look at the first corner and came hastily out of the pit for a better view.

Trip was smarting under the shellacking I had handed him and was set to work Joe over. The nose of his Number Eighteen was right in Joe's lap all the way around. That part was all

right. That's the way the midget racing business is run. What wasn't all right was the fact that he was backing off on the corner just before sliding and then coming up on Joe with a lot of excess speed. I saw Joe gauging him from the corner of his goggles as the bright grillework of Eighteen came for his middle, fast. Each time Trip snubbed it with a deft hand just when a collision seemed inevitable.

What I was afraid of happened in the third lap.

Joe hit the turn in a smooth, controlled broadslide, wheels dusting the inner marker and the red and white body of Sassy Lassie at right angles to the track direction. Trip came off the straightaway with all the coal on, his engine shrieking. Then he cut straight across the corner. Eighteen's nose arrowed directly for Joe's cockpit and closed up the thirty-foot gap like you pick up a cripple on the backstretch. I saw his hand come off the wheel for the brake and then the chrome nose touched the frame rails of Joe's car!

Sassy Lassie shuddered sideways for an instant, tried to hold her rubber on the ground, and then the outside wheels stuck on the banked dirt! She flipped in three lightning rolls, knocked a hole through the crash wall and rocked to a stop in a hash of broken boards and bent metal.

Joe instantly wriggled free, held his hands over his head to indicate that he was O.K., and started for the pits, tearing at his helmet straps.

The heat was over by the time he reached the stalls and he started on the run for Eighteen's pit. Trip came sliding in and all I could see was a knot of wrestling figures as the pit guards came running up. It was over by the time I got there. Trip makes nearly two of Joe, so it was Joe who was nursing his face. He was so mad he was almost crying.

"It was an accident," Trip was shouting. "I got going too fast and the brake wouldn't snub it in time. I just barely touched him."

He was right there. You barely have to touch them on the side when centrifugal force is stretched so rubber-thin.

"Maybe," I said grimly. "Don't ever try that when I'm around, though." I led Joe away.

He subsided somewhat by the time we reached my pit. "I'm sorry as hell about Sassy Lassie, Jeff," he said. "I guess that about blows my chances for the finals."

"Forget it," I replied. "We can iron out Lassie. And forget about the finals, too. I want to think."

I was doing a lot of thinking as I rolled out for my heat, more thinking than driving, and I had to go like hell in the last lap to make up for some of the mental concentration of the prior loops. I didn't go back to the pit afterward. Instead, I pulled to the infield by the starting line and talked with the starter. He shook his head and waved his arms. I did some more talking and he called the referee over. He listened and stroked his chin. "Well—" he said, "it's unusual but I guess you're right. It doesn't seem to be against the rules."

Back in the pit Elise met me with troubled eyes. "Do you think Trip did that deliberately?"

I ignored the question, said, "Give me the board," and took the proffered record sheet and studied it for a moment. "Joe's going to drive the main," I finally said.

"But Sassy Lassie is . . ."

"He's taking my place in Number Seven."

"Jeff! No!" she protested. "Trip's in the main. One of them will be hurt." Then she snatched the board back, studied it for a moment, and said haltingly, "Oh, I see."

"I thought you would," I said evenly. "You know there's only two things in life he's looking forward to. One is a crack at an Indianapolis car. And the winner of the finals usually gets an invitation to drive on the bricks. Tonight's main is twenty-five points, and if Joe is out of tonight's show he'll never have enough points for selection for the finals. Besides he's better off back in competition before the memory of that loop gets working on him. He can take care of himself. He'll have to."

"How about you? You're giving up your place."

I shrugged it off.

"You said there were two things, Jeff," she prompted gently.

I looked at her narrowly. "I'll leave you to guess the other one, Kitten," I replied. "You like him—them, a lot, don't you?"

"I like a lot of people," she answered. Surprisingly there was a hint of moisture in her eyes. "I like shy little kids like Joe. And I like little boys wearing their first long pants who haven't remembered it's not nice to brag—like Trip. And I even like Mr. Fixits who have everything solved just dandy.

"Jeff," she added dreamily. "You had Shakespeare in school. Read *Much Ado About Nothing* sometime. You see"—she was looking at me from the corners of her eyes— "I like men."

I let it go, although I spent a puzzling moment over that final remark. But I had other worrying to do and the main event wasn't five laps old before I wondered if I hadn't been foolish in insisting that Joe drive Number Seven. I had driven home the point in harsh fashion in briefing him at the starting line.

"I don't care about your score, Joe. That's your business and you can settle it in your own fashion—somewhere else. Never mind Trip. I'm giving up my seat to get you enough points to make the finals. You need the twenty-five tonight will give you, so drive it smart. Remember—not smart, no finals and maybe no crack at an Indianapolis boiler."

He hadn't answered. Just sat there, white-faced and silent.

I'd had a hot qualifying time and Number Seven was at the tail end of the line. At the dropping of the flag Joe's foot hit the floor and, instead of driving for the pole, he swung to the outside, cut through two cars and dropped on Trip's gleaming tail.

WHAT followed was a classical scramble. Maybe not for the crowd; all they really saw was two cars glued together. The initated ones in the pit were seeing something else, though—Seven's nose right on the chromium bumper strip below Eighteen's tail, a poised threat like a lance, ready at any moment to tap, ever so lightly, when Eighteen was crossed in a slide. It doesn't take much if you're wise. When a car is crossed that far, it's riding the narrow edge of nothing as far as staying right side up is concerned. All that's holding it there is skillful sawing on the wheel and an expert foot on the power. Even a light tap can roll it if you catch it just right.

The referee saw it, too, and I saw two white-uniformed men run to each turn.

Trip was really driving. His head was turning rapidly as he'd gauge each corner and then Joe's proximity. He was getting ready for something. I knew what and wondered if Joe could see it. About the eighteenth, the pair was out in the breeze and streaking for the lower turn. Trip drove the straightaway out in the center, carrying over there slowly and pulling Seven with him as he widened his approach. His engine softened and then snarled as he jumped on it. Joe followed suit and the nose of Seven came right up against him.

Suddenly Trip pulled full right wheel and cut his engine. Eighteen slid for the outside, almost stalled as the dirt banked under the wheels and then, as abruptly, screeched under full gun and the wheels went to full lock on the other side!

It was a superb maneuver. Joe was through the hole. He couldn't help himself. Eighteen came inside him and Trip's grillework was right in the middle of Joe's cockpit—only Trip was now on the inside!

The grille hit Joe lightly and Seven skidded sideways across the speedway. Eighteen wrenched free and was on the inner rail. It was an expert job and only smooth hands kept Trip from a power spin in the two full lock-slides. He was free and clear now and bellowing up the backstretch. And he might have stayed free and clear except for one thing.

My engine is pretty fair—about as good as they come—and Joe gave it a ride that was classic. Even from the outside of the crash wall I could see the determination etched on his face. He slashed the straightaway after Trip in a full bore charge that didn't even soften for axle slack at the corner. He took it in, floored the throttle, and left it there. Seven had all four wheels jumping off the dirt and he was steering in the air for half the turn. You just can't make corners that way. But Joe did.

He caught Trip on the stretch and they both left it pegged for the full run. It was a mortal cinch that a midget track just couldn't hold two cars in one turn at that speed and I held my breath as they cocked for the turn.

They both swung sideways together, Joe inside, and he fitted Seven's right front wheel just between the line of Trip's front and rear wheels and almost against his frame rail. Both cars were shuddering in the turn.

Then I saw the rear end of Eighteen lift. Trip's left rear wheel climbed the outer front wheel of Seven. Eighteen hung there for a moment, careened along on an outside front wheel and suddenly flipped in two vicious loops!

The scene with the referee was brief. The white-uniformed watcher on the turn told his story and ended with, ". . . just one of those things . . ."

"Did Humphries hit Hammer's car?" the referee asked.

The man shook his head and the referee shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands in a gesture that indicated no case and walked away.

The scene in the pits was equally brief. Unostentatiously two of the pit guards were on hand as Trip, nursing a goggle cut under his eye, glowered and said, "O.K., Humphries. We're even now. And now I want to tell you something else. Don't get within a mile of me on any racetrack, ever! That goes for the finals, too. The next time, somebody will get carried off—and it won't be me!"

I shook my head as I joined Joe.

"You heard what the referee said," he ventured innocently.

"Don't give me that line. I didn't pay to get in this place, you know. I've seen a race-meet or two. You fitted your wheel in there and then cut the gun. Trip's rear wheel came forward and climbed your front end."

"I'm sorry, Jeff," Joe said penitently. Then he added, slyly, "You taught me the trick."

I grumbled something in the beard I didn't have and broke off as Elise joined us. For a full moment she stared steadily at the pair of us. A slow flush mounted Joe's cheeks. "That wasn't 'nice going', Joe," she said through curling lips. "Why don't you write nasty things about him on the outside fence?"

"Take it easy, Kitten," I interjected. "After all . . ."

"After all, nothing," she blazed. "You're old enough to have better sense, Jeff Dwyer. You gave him the car. You men and your

'honor' make me sick!" Tears filled her eyes. "You know what will happen now. For the sake of your silly schoolboy code one of you will be hurt. Trip is wild and you've made such an issue of things he won't rest until he's cleared his slate."

I knew she was right and unwillingness to admit it made my reply tart. "Well, the guy's a phony. Besides Joe needed the points and besides . . ." I wasn't doing too well and the acid in my voice washed out weakly as I added, "You seem to go for big shots. Maybe Joe will be . . ."

The fire in her eyes trailed the sentence off into nothing. "I'm sure Joe can mark up the points on his cast and he can be a big shot in Ward A," she said bitterly. "All right, Jeff, you're running the Advice to the Lovelorn column. You take care of both of them. And yourself. Then," she added. "when you can spare a moment from playing Mr. Fixit, take a look around in the forest. Perhaps you'll see a tree!" She stalked angrily away.

Joe looked at me. I looked at him. We both shook our heads in unison and bewilderment.

The State Championships were coming up the following week. We had two more nights of racing but I pulled both Lassie and Number Seven and went into communion in my shop. Joe and I both had enough points to qualify for the six-man team from our Association and I had some work and some thinking to do.

The other three groups were also sending six-man teams for the finals at Sacramento's quarter-mile track. The race might have been just another tangle, but what made it different was that customarily the winner got an opportunity to shepherd a big car at racing's shrine, the two miles of brick that was the Indianapolis Speedway, on next May Day.

Mix an incentive like that with twenty-four guys, eighteen of them strangers, add a dash of Sacramento's long, fast straightaways and you have a perfect recipe for a filling for hospital beds, complete with crust. Personally I had no interest in the bricks. Big cars scare me. The same with the other twenty-three guys. But Joe wanted to make it, and that called for some thought.

I DINGED out the dents in Lassie and went to work on both engines. The engines were supposedly identical, although mine was considerably the better of the pair. Racing engines are that way. But despite the concentration called for, I was doing it only haphazardly. It was nearly the end of the week before I made the decision and then I really threw on the nuts and bolts.

Sacramento was just what I knew it would be—nothing but low flying. The herd was there, eighteen of them in the hottest iron in the state and the time trials alone threw dirt clear into the next county. Our gang was doing all right for the Association in general and my pig was doing fair for Dwyer in particular.

Trip was grimly silent and hotter than a firecracker. Joe was equally silent and polishing off laps in nineteen seconds.

There were no heat races. Instead, just a few match events bringing together drivers from the various Associations, so there wasn't too much to worry about until we all got together in the main.

We were in the pit under the huge concrete grandstand and I saw Elise working her way down through the group of cars on a motor number check. She finally got to my stall, unstrapped the hood on Lassie and peered at the motor number with a flashlight. She duplicated the procedure on Number Seven, made some marks on the record board. She studied the marks for a moment, then came close to me and said, "You'll be careful, won't you, Jeff? And don't let them do anything foolish if you can help it. I don't want any of you hurt."

My reply was lost in the bellow of the pit speaker calling for main event cars and the space beneath the stadium erupted into action. I walked over to Sassy Lassie, pulled the seatpad forward and reached under the tail. After a second I said, "O.K. to roll," and two boys in white coveralls backed her up.

I had almost reached the speedway entrance when Elise's voice breathed in my ear. "That was fine, Jeff—terribly fine. Good luck—darling!" Startled, I turned but she was lost in the stream of cars and pushers.

The line-up was a handsome sight with the parallel rows of shining cars glistening under the cold lights. The start was inverted and that put Rolly Calder from the south on the outside at the tail end. Trip was next to him and Joe had pole in the second row. They were the three fastest qualifiers and I was up two more rows. The P. A. system traveled leisurely up the line for introductions and I polished my goggles for the hundredth time. Suddenly the agony was over as the curt motion of the rolled-up flag in the starter's hand signified, "roll 'em!"

It was a blistering fast start and I wasn't wrong in my guess that somebody wouldn't make the first corner. Two cars tangled and spun to the crash wall and the traffic was like Market Street at high noon. I found a hole and got through, spared a second for a hasty look back and found Rolly, Trip and Joe all on my tail. I had work to do and it could be better done from the rear. I backed off a little.

Rolly was first through. Then Trip and Joe swept through abreast and I tailed in. For the moment our job was mutual—that of polishing off the cripples and getting some fresh air. Then we could snap at one another. The four

of us were pretty handy and we steamed through with nice teamwork, wedging a car off the corner here, boxing another there.

Rolly slid free with some nice cornering, Joe made it through the turn right behind him and Trip followed with his nose right against Joe's tail. I saved about ten feet and a little throttle for maneuvering room. The pace was hot, very much so, but still it was under control. We were going fast enough to grind down car after car and it was too early to put your faith in St. Peter on the corners. The main was fifty laps and it was about half way through when I saw a board with a chalked "25" held up by one of Trip's pitmen.

Instantly the throttle on Trip's Eighteen was floored. He moved in alongside Joe, passed him and went after Rolly. Rolly also hit the floor when Eighteen's nose showed up, held it for a moment and then Trip rode him right off the corner. Joe and I both jumped for the hole and made it before Rolly got straightened up.

The chips were down now and the backstretch run was a sizzler. Wide open for the whole distance, pegged for the turn and still pegged coming out, it was a nineteen-second run on a prayer. I can drive the first eighteen seconds. Either Peter or Paul has to take it over for the other one.

We blasted into the lower corner and Joe's engine caught Trip just as he crossed-up for the turn. For just one moment I thought that this was it and then I saw smoke and knew that Joe had backed it off. Joe tried it again on the upper corner and when I saw the smoke once more I felt relieved. Joe was racing—not feuding. The stretch run was just too hot, however—Trip couldn't shut off. We'd have passed him if he did. And he just couldn't be sure of the turn at that pace. Eighteen crossed in a wide power slide and then the front end broke loose and he skidded outward for six feet before they caught.

Joe made the slot but Trip had it closed before I got there. I wiped my goggles free of the spuming dirt and almost let Rolly through before I woke up. Joe led the way into the turn now and it was still the same blasting cornering but this time it was Trip who was the second man off the gun when it came to getting some axle-slack to slide with. This gave him just an extra fractional second to accelerate in if he wished it. And he did.

Lassie was completely crossways and I saw Trip's nose slash straight across the speedway right for the center of Joe's cockpit. Lassie's wheels bit just as he got there and she picked up enough speed to hold both cars relatively motionless but I had seen enough. I knew now that Trip was feuding, not driving, and that he'd either win or put both of them up against the wall. And I had to go to work.

I had three lengths to go to get up there. I didn't have enough speed to do it on the straightaway; both Joe and Trip gained a length there. So I put three hundred competition hours to work in cornering. What held Seven right side up was beyond me. I guess Peter and Paul. Seven shuddered and shook and her rubber smoked. I kept the slides to the barest possible minimum to hold the greatest forward speed. The gain was agonizingly slow and seemingly measured in inches. Time and again Trip shot for Joe and only Lassie's horsepower pulled Joe clear at the last possible instant. It just couldn't go on.

(Continued on page 145)

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BREED OF THE BLUE HEN

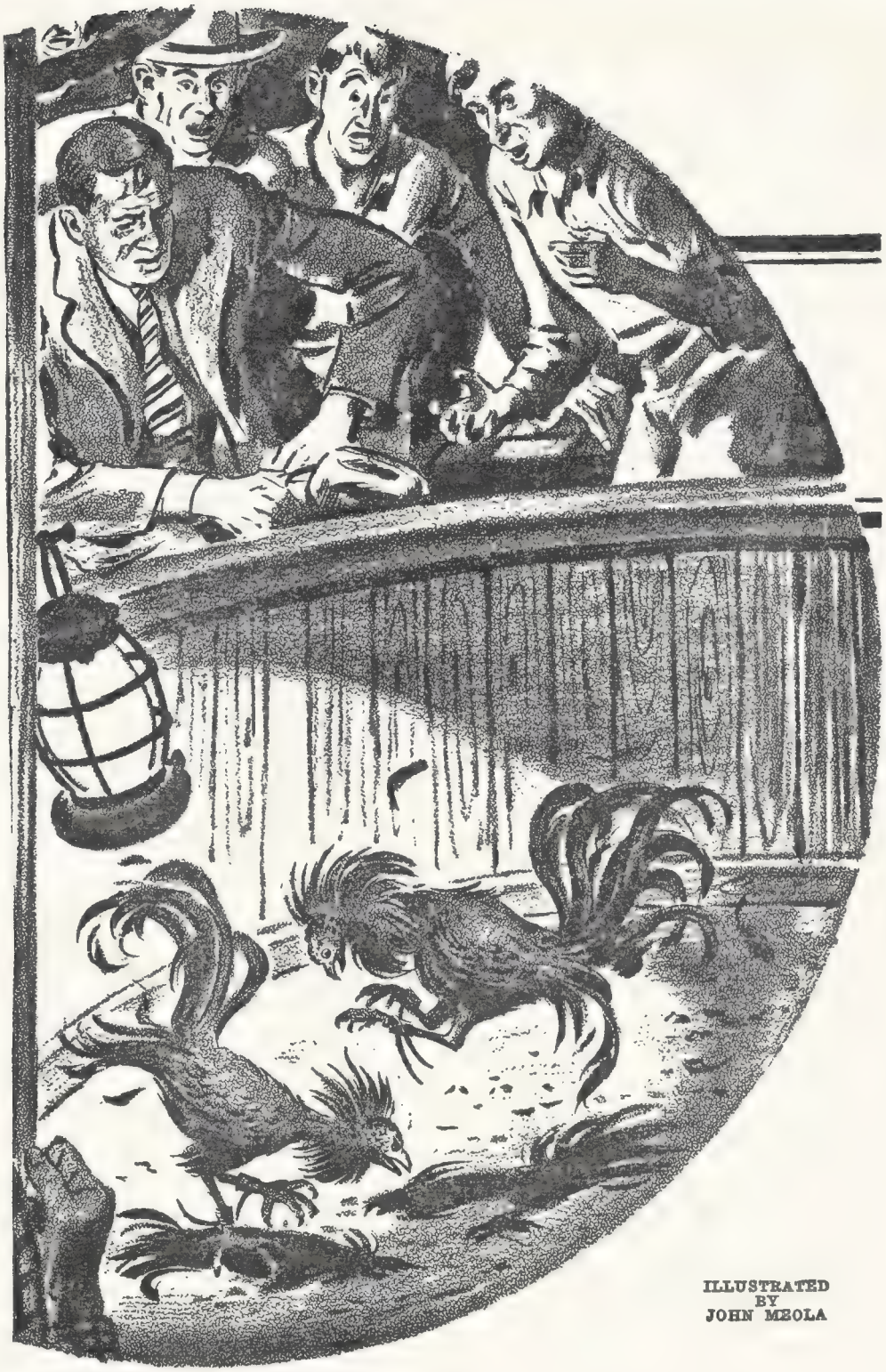
By
JIM KJELGAARD

THE lighted lanterns in the barn painted it yellow, Al Carzot thought, and the whimsical notion brought a smile to his sunburned and wind-lined face. Yellow was the color of cowardice and craven defeat, and though there might be defeat in this barn, it would never be craven. A fighting cock could die—many of them did—but there was never anything yellow when they went down. They would let their enemies cut them to pieces, shedding blood as they were dismembered inch by inch. But, while they were capable of any thought, their last one would be how they were going to get in a final blow and bring victory out of fading life.

Maybe that was one reason a man could love a game cock. But why he had to devote his life to being such a fool was still a disputed question.

Al stroked the gray cock that sat in his lap. It was a five pound rooster whose dubbed head was eagerly erect as his black eyes sought the

Suddenly, and so swiftly that the watchers at the pit side could not be certain as to what had happened, the little red rooster wheeled about. He met the Green Flash almost head-on, and his legs flashed as he rose to drive his spurs in.



ILLUSTRATED
BY
JOHN MEOLA

pit in the center of the barn. He couldn't see the men who crowded around that pit, watching a couple of stags fighting to a finish. But the gray rooster knew that there was a fight going on and he wanted to be in it. Only he couldn't be in any ordinary fight. Not this rooster.

Al let his fingers play down the gray cock's strong legs to his amputated spurs, and his hand went from the cock's legs to his own pocket and the little box that housed the steel spurs. They were only an inch and a half long from where they fitted over what had been the gray cock's natural spurs to their needle-sharp tips. But those spurs had been designed for the gray rooster, made to fit the fighting style of a Carzot Rambler. The opposing rooster might wear three-inch spurs, but the short ones were fitted to the close and deadly infighting for which Al had bred his cocks.

Al bent down and whispered into the gray cock's ears, "Get in there and fight for me tonight, baby, and for the rest of your life you'll have as much fightin' as you can handle."

At the touch of the familiar fingers on his neck, the gray rooster clucked contentedly. Al leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Unless he had a million dollars, a man given to cock-fighting was a lost man. Al didn't have a million. All he had was the crumpled wad of greasy bills in his pocket. But he wanted to bet all of them on the gray cock.

It was almost the cock about which he had dreamed since, at the age of ten, his father had taken him to his first cock fight. Al had watched the battling birds in the pit, fighting things that neither asked nor extended quarter, great-hearted creatures whose only thought and only delight was battle. And, that night, there was born within him the misty, half-real notion of a great cock that was to be. There hadn't been any exact thought in his mind as to just how that cock might be produced.

But for the next twenty years he had thought of nothing else. Still letting his fingers play around the neck of the gray rooster in his lap, Al leaned back and closed his eyes. Before him there arose a panoramic review of what those twenty years had been. None had brought wealth, and during some of them Al had been pressed for enough to eat. But always, before him, there had been a vision of the great fighting cock, the one that some day he must have. And always he had failed to achieve it. The cocks he bred had fought in every pit from Tia Juana to Bangor, the equals of anything in their class. But some had fought out of their class, and nearly always those that Al handled personally had fought cocks superior to themselves. But that was all in the past now.

It was three years since he had owned the Blue Hen. She was the mother of some of the most famous fighting cocks that ever cut a rival to pieces, and Al had seen her in a city commission house. He did not know how she had come there, how she had been numbered among the dunghill Leghorns, Rocks, and heterogeneous assortment of other chickens slated for the stew pot or roasting oven. No doubt someone, probably someone who didn't know a fighting chicken from a canary, had stolen her from her roost and sent her with other illegal plunder to the commission house. But, when he had entered the commission house to meet a friend, Al recognized her. He had bought the Blue Hen for a dollar, and taken her home to be the mother of the great fighting cock his dreams had envisioned.

Breeding produced a champion fighting cock, the breeding that was in the gray rooster which sat on Al's lap. Son of the Blue Hen, and Al's best cock—in all the world there just couldn't be a finer fighting rooster. It was a cock capable of beating even Linn Magill's Green Flash.

The gray cock raised its head, and clucked softly. Al opened his eyes, blinking slightly in the yellow glow of the lanterns, and looked across the barn to see Linn Magill. The other man's gold teeth flashed as his lips parted in a smile. The hundred and seventy-five dollar suit he wore was spokesman for the wealth he had to cast about. Linn Magill was an oil man, a man with so much money that the huge sums he won—or lost—at fights were mere tokens.

When he came near Al Carzot he said, "What you got there? Another of your old dunghills?"

Al Carzot calmly regarded him. Money was by no means a worthless thing. It could not buy courage, or worth, or the flashing brilliance of a good cock in the pit. But it could buy the best blood lines, and breeding produced the best cocks. Al looked away from Linn Magill. In the past ten years, because his money bought him the best fighting cocks available, Linn Magill had taken thousands of dollars away from Al. But did a man have the right to call himself such if he would not bet on a rooster that he himself had bred?

Al Carzot said mildly, "I've got a fightin' cock here, Linn."

The other man laughed, displaying his gold-filled teeth in a copious smile that was somehow raw and impure. Linn Magill was secure with his money, positive that no one else could ever produce anything half as good as unlimited wealth could buy. He was not stingy. Yet, Al knew, he had to think of himself as a superior man, and of all his possessions as superior goods.

Linn Magill asked mockingly, "How good a 'fighting' cock have you got?"

"Good enough," Al Carzot said, "to lick anything you've got."

"So-o." Linn Magill's voice was like the purring of a cat. "And how much money have you got that says so?"

Al Carzot thought of the greasy roll of bills in his pocket, the last money he had in the world. But a man was still less than a man if he wouldn't bet on his own fighting cock, and he said, "Four hundred and seventy-five dollars."

"I'll cover you even," Linn Magill said triumphantly. "I've got that much says this gray can't lick my Green Flash!"

A COCKPIT, Al Carzot thought, was not just a roped-off enclosure in a barn. It was something else, something that had nothing whatever to do with side bets and the excited faces of the spectators who ringed it in. A cockpit was a place where men and cocks were tested, and when he looked from his corner at the flushed, eager face of Linn Magill, Al knew that the other man was afraid. Defeat for his cock was defeat for him, and Linn Magill could stand only victory.

A cockpit was also a place where two living things that never knew fear, or anything save the intense desire to battle one another, fought to the death. It was always a clean and glorious death, and whichever went down, no man had the right to intrude his own fear and pettiness upon a pair of battling cocks. Al looked across at Tommy Milwern, Linn Magill's handler, and the cock in Tommy's hands.

It was a wonderful creature, a smooth, snake-headed killing machine whose burnished feathers shone green under the pale light cast by the hanging lanterns. Not for nothing had it been named the Green Flash. Two and a half years old, at the very height of its strength and vitality, the Green Flash had fought in every national pit and killed everything brought against it. It had added thousands of dollars—in wagers won—to Linn Magill's swollen bankroll. Al Carzot looked away. A man fated to be a fool must be one. But he still must bet on a rooster that he himself had bred, and money was a small thing compared to a good fight.

The voice of the pit master came clearly, "Bill your birds."

Al Carzot carried the gray rooster halfway across the pit and met Tommy Milwern there. He pushed the gray rooster's head forward to brush that of the Green Flash, and instantly became aware of the change in the cock he carried. It had been eagerly watching the battles, anxious to get in them. But now that it knew a battle of its own would shortly ensue, a certain surcharged energy seemed to flow through the legs and stiffening neck of the gray cock. Never, even though it would only stand stupidly in the pit looking for an opening, would a fighting cock try to evade a battle. And, unless they were separated by extraneous forces, that fight was always to the death. The rooster in Tommy Milwern's arms clucked, and looked with a warrior's interest at the gray cock. Pecking before they met in battle was only for stags—young birds.

The pit master said, "The fight is started."

Al Carzot let the gray cock go and saw him hop a third of the way across the pit. He stood there, ruff bristling and neck extended as he studied his rival. Al Carzot's heart beat out a pounding rhythm of pride and pleasure. There was something in the stance of the gray cock that bespoke confidence, mastery, and when the Green Flash came from his corner they went into the air together. But the fight was not started. Like seasoned gladiators, the cocks in the pit were merely testing each other's defenses before they engaged in serious battle.

Then the gray side-stepped, hopped into the air, and when he came down his steel-spurred foot raked his enemy's feathered back. It was a swift and powerful blow, and it would have been a fatal one had not his adversary been so experienced a battler. A little cloud of burnished green feathers floated into the air, and Al Carzot started as a hand tapped his shoulder.

He turned to look Linn Magill in the eye, and the oil man said, "Stop the fight now and I'll give you a thousand dollars for that gray cock."

"Thank you, sir," Al Carzot said. "But you can go to hell!"

Linn Magill laughed, a nervous little sound that bubbled from uncertain lips, and said, "I've seen the Blue Hen's chicks fight before. If I didn't know she'd disappeared three years ago, I'd swear this was one of 'em."

"You'd probably swear to a lot of things," Al Carzot said, and turned around to watch the fight. The exultation and singing triumph still trilled within him. For long years he had matched his cocks against those of Linn Magill, and always he had lost. Now the other man was worried. No novice at a cockpit, he knew that his own champion was equaled by the gray cock.

The Green Flash hopped, feinted to one side for a neck stroke, and came down to rake the gray's breast with one spurred leg. Again, breast to breast, they went up while each sought for a bill hold or a spur opening.

One of the lanterns, hanging overhead on a nail, wavered as a little gust of wind wandered through the barn. It flickered and went out. Then, loosed from its nail, the lantern came crashing down. There was the silvery tinkle of breaking glass, a flurry of wings, and when Al Carzot looked again the gray cock lay outstretched in the pit. One of the other cock's shining spurs had driven completely through its head, and the Green Flash strutted about the pit with blood dripping from the spur.

Linn Magill said, "I'm sorry, Al."

"Don't be," Al Carzot said.

"We can't call it a fight."

"But it was a fight."

Al Carzot walked in to pick up his dead cock, and even through the emptiness that beset him he knew what he must do. A man could lose many ways, and he had no right to complain because luck ran against him. The gray might have killed the other cock if the falling lantern had not distracted him. Al turned around, and was again aware of Linn Magill's strangely smiling face.

The oil man said, "Tough break, Al. You had a champion there."

"I'll have another," Al Carzot heard himself saying. "The breeding stock that produced this one's still in my chicken house."

"Breeding counts," Linn Magill murmured. "Think you can beat my cocks with what you're going to get?"

"I know I can."

Al Carzot turned away and walked stiffly to a seat at the back end of the barn. He held up the gray cock and looked at it, then tenderly laid it across his lap while he stared unseeing, at the pit. Even after twenty years of trying to breed a great cock, and finally achieving that aim, a man could not whimper just because the breaks were against him. A fighting cock wouldn't know what to do with a crying towel, and a man should try to be at least as good as a chicken. But he didn't feel like going home just yet.

An hour later, when he left the barn, he noticed that Linn Magill had gone. As soon as he felt the cool night air against his face, Al felt better. His gray champion was dead. But it was the destiny of all fighting cocks to die fighting, and they would want it no other way. Not everything was lost. He still had the Blue Hen, along with five of her young sons, three of her daughters, and the cock who had sired the gray. A man who had tried for twenty years could try again. He got used to trying. Al walked down the dusty tree-bordered road that led to his house, and turned up the grassy lane. He was still a hundred and fifty yards from the house when the smell of smoke assailed his nostrils, and out in the darkness, little flickering eyes of fire winked at him.

Even without going nearer, Al knew that his chicken house had burned to the ground and only a few crackling boards were left to mark where it had been.

HE STOOD before it, a blackened hole from which little spirals of blue smoke licked upward into the night. The eager flames that still gnawed their way through unburned boards cast their light over the scene, but through it all Al saw only the smiling, cunning eyes and the florid face of Linn Magill. He had read fear in the oil man's face at the cock fight, and echoing back, a thousand times louder than he had spoken them, came his own words, "I'll have another. The breeding stock that produced this one's still in my chicken house."

The breeding stock *had* been in his chicken house. Now it was burned to a crisp in the scorched boards and hot ashes. Al swung fiercely to face the barn from which he had come. Linn Magill, or someone appointed by him, had done this. Linn recognized a great fighting cock when he saw one, and breeding did count. It counted so much to one who wouldn't even fight cocks unless there were definite odds in his favor, that he would sneak up here and destroy by fire the only threat that had ever challenged his own fighting birds and the supremacy they represented. Al gritted his teeth as vast and almost overwhelming anger surged within him.

Then, almost at once, he was aware of the helplessness and futility of his own position. He was a little man, a nameless person so enamored of cocks and cock-fighting that he could not hold a steady job or even make his farm pay more than a meager living. Linn Magill was a man of power, one who had ready access to other people of power. The most that would be gained now by seeking him out and thrashing him was a momentary satisfaction. Afterwards—soon afterwards—Al would land in jail. And, even though he beat Linn Magill within an inch of his life, there would be no adequate revenge. He had no proof that the other man had come here, or sent someone here, and burned down his chicken house. There were many ways in which buildings could catch fire. As for killing Linn Magill . . . Al shook his throbbing head. He was not a killer. Nor could even the death of whoever was responsible for this crime atone for the crime. Everything was gone. Nothing would bring it back.

Cradling the dead gray cock in his hands, Al walked toward the house. There was shame and contrition for the last partial thought that he had nearly admitted. If a man learned nothing else from game cocks, he should learn that nothing was ever licked until it confessed that it was. Al had seen game cocks so battered that they could scarcely raise their heads. Yet, so long as a speck of life remained within them, they would raise their heads for one last peck at their enemies. If a chicken could do that, a man could hold his head up.

Al laid the gray cock on the porch and entered his two-room house. A combination wood and heating stove dominated the kitchen. At the other end of the room was a wooden table and a cupboard. A crude wooden bench had been arranged in front of the window, and on

Even without going nearer, Al knew that his chicken house had burned to the ground.

a staw-filled box that perched upon it, a fussy Buff Orpington hen raised her head and ruffled her feathers when Al turned on the light.

Al looked soberly at her, and crossed the room to lift her from the nest and examine the tiny brown chick that crawled about beneath her. From one of the blue hen's eggs, this chick was the only fighting blood left to him. He sank dully into a chair and regarded the fussy old hen as she adjusted her feathers and cuddled the chick. These remained, out of all that had been. One old seventy-five-cent dunghill hen and a downy chick.

Al Carzot crossed to the cupboard and pulled the door open. He took out a quarter-empty bottle of whiskey, and poured a water tumbler half full. But when it was halfway to his lips, he drew back his hand and smashed it violently against the far wall. Again, before his eyes, there arose the vision of a mangled, bloody, and nine-tenths dead cock. His mind's eye saw it try to get on its feet so it could fight again. Well—dammit! A man was still as good as a chicken.

He crossed the floor to tickle the fussy old Orpington under the neck, and the brown chick peeped drowsily when he slid his hand beneath the hen to feel it. The old Orpington turned around to peck warningly at his wrist, and Al withdrew to stand with his hands on his hips. Twenty years was a lot, almost a third of a man's life. But anyone who'd given that much time to realizing a dream might just as well go on in the same track. It was

too late to start anything else anyway. He turned around to face the wall mirror and a young-old face stared back at him. Again he looked at the old Orpington and her chick.

More breeding stock might be had. But it didn't pay to go fooling around with dunghills, or near dunghills, and the sort of stock he wanted was not to be had for pennies. However, he might just as well have another whirl at it. Somehow and somewhere he could get the money he needed to start.

Of course it was hopeless to try to get a job. He had deserted so many to give his time to fighting cocks that no employer would trust him any more. But there were things he could do. There were various plants on the hills about his house, ginseng and golden-seal, which were worth money. There was a ready market for wild berries. Then, throughout the fall and winter, there would be furs to trap. He wouldn't get rich, but he wouldn't starve. As soon as he got enough money he must go seek more breeding stock. Mexico and Cuba had fine cocks, and somewhere there was one to beat Linn Magill's Green Flash.

Tomorrow, the first thing, he would start a new chicken house. He'd make it big enough for many chickens, even though its present occupants were only the old Orpington and her chick. He would also build separate exercise pens and runs for roosters; any rooster more than five months old would pick a fight and battle to the death if left with another cock. Al lay down on his cot.

The last thing he saw before relieving sleep stole over him was the crafty, somehow sly, and fearful face of Linn Magill. Al muttered, and tossed on the cot.

AUTUMN faded into winter, and, in its turn, was followed by an early spring. Willows bedecked themselves in rich green all along the streams, and the sun baked the wetness out of the land. Then, increasing, it began to cook the raw newness out of the chicken house and exercise pens Al had built, so that they matched the weatherbeaten appearance of his house. The big yellow Orpington and her chick, grown into a slim pullet, roosted in empty loneliness in the chicken house at night and by day came out to roam through the burdocks or sun themselves.

But the winter had been an unkind and snow-filled one. One blizzard had keened out of the north on the heels of another, and intense cold had reigned. Instead of wandering about, the fur animals had crouched in their dens. Even when they emerged to hunt for food, most of the time the traps Al set for them had been frozen or snowed under. There had been only enough furs to pay expenses and lay aside a little money for the dull early-summer period when there were no berries to pick or roots to gather. He could still get along. But there would be no trips in search of game stock this year. Oh, he might pick up something if he went. But something just wasn't enough. Still within his brain, sharper and clearer than ever, was the image of the great cock of which he had dreamed. It would take more than just any bird to live up to that picture.

The season advanced so swiftly that the first of May was almost like summer. Trees were in full leaf, and flowers were blooming two weeks in advance of their usual time. The second day of May, Al saw the big car turn from the road and start up the lane that led to his house.

He knew without looking twice that it was Linn Magill. The oil man always drove sleek and shiny cars, big enough to carry him in comfort and fast enough to take him at great speed wherever he wished to go. Al stiffened, and felt his hands grow tense as Linn Magill wheeled his car about so that it was sideways to the house. But there was still no use in starting a quarrel here.

Al settled back on the porch, a quiet, worn man whose face bore the marks of the frustrations he had encountered. Yet, there was something else in it, too, something that would escape the eyes of anyone who didn't know how to look for quality in a game cock—or a man.

Linn Magill smiled, said, "I heard you had a little hard luck."

Al shrugged. "Hard luck is impartial. It lights on all, in their turn."

"Yes," Linn Magill said. And again, "Yes." He looked away, and Al Carzot had a fleeting impression of a triumphant cock crowing. It wasn't a game cock, but an overbearing dunghill that must fight with brute force alone. Linn Magill looked back again. "I'm going to Texas," he said, "and I'm walking the Green Flash with Joe Magruder."

Al's eyes sought the floor, but rose. Hate was a bitter thing, and a man couldn't help hating on some occasions. Again he had the fleeting impression of a victorious dunghill cock crowing. Linn Magill had come to tell him that Joe Magruder was going to walk—take care of—the Green Flash. How much better off Al Carzot would have been if only he had admitted, to Linn Magill, that he was whipped.

But Al said mildly, "I'm sure Joe will take good care of him."

"I'm sure he will," Linn Magill agreed, and then, "So long, Al."

"So long."

Al watched the car swing out of the lane into the road. A man could hate another man. But he could never hate a game cock. No

matter who owned one, or how tainted he might be, the cock would have to be clean and fight clean. When they killed an enemy they did so fairly, and not with torches in the night. A game cock would not know how to do that sort of thing. But a man . . . For a long while after Linn Magill had gone Al sat silently on the porch.

Three hours later, he caught up the fussy old Orpington and the slim brown pullet and, with one under each arm, walked down the dusty road. Joe Magruder was a mean and small man who placed getting another dollar for himself above all other considerations. But once that dollar was paid, he would give a dollar's worth to the last penny.

Al shuffled up the beaten path that led to his door, and met Joe Magruder on the porch. Al said easily, "Hi, Joe."

"Hi," Joe Magruder answered.

"I've got a couple of chickens here," Al announced, "and I aim to go fishin' for a week. Will you take care of 'em?"

"It'll cost ye a dollar," Joe Magruder said cautiously.

"It's worth it."

"Throw 'em down," Joe Magruder said, his shifty eyes revealing the contempt he felt for anyone who cared so little for earthly gain that he could afford to fish for a week. "I've got a new rooster here. He'll keep 'em in line."

Nine days later, two days after Al had brought his chickens home again, the little brown pullet came sneaking carefully out of the burdocks. As soon as she had regained the haunts familiar to herself and the big Orpington, she relaxed into an attitude of utter boredom and complete indifference. On the tenth day she disappeared, and after a half hour's desultory search, Al ceased to look for her.

On a day more than three weeks later the brown pullet reappeared. She clucked softly, and eight downy day-old chicks scooted from beneath a burdock to cluster about her feet.

Al watched delightedly from the porch, and slowly descended the steps to approach them. The little hen ruffled her feathers and put herself in front of the chicks while she faced him warningly. But Al halted ten steps away, and all the hope and pent-up yearning that he had managed to keep stifled within his breast seemed to find life once more.

Of the eight chicks, three were white, four had inherited the babyhood brown of their mother, but the last one was an unsullied soft yellow. The hen flew in his face and beat him with flailing wings when Al went forward to pick up the chick. He brushed her off, while she anxiously shepherded her flock to the safety of the burdocks, clucking softly to the missing one. Al let it sit in the palm of his outstretched hand.

It looked fearlessly back at him. Courage was not a quality that could be trained, or injected, or beaten, into a cock. It had to be born there, and a day-old chick, snatched up by something two thousand times bigger than itself, had to be able to look calmly at that thing without peeping and squealing its fear. When Al put the chick down, it walked instead of scooting back to the hen and went about picking up the bugs that her scratching feet uncovered.

Al sighed, and a happiness that he had not hoped to know for years—perhaps never—welled up within him. The Blue Hen had mothered the best of his previous stock. The Green Flash was a mighty cock, and there was something about the little yellow chick that said he had begotten a mighty son. Of course there were any number of things that could go wrong, and a chick did not necessarily have to grow up to be a cock. But Al's grounds had always been disease-free, and predators he needn't fear. The brown hen would die fighting before any mink, cat, weasel, or hawk came within striking distance of one of her chicks. That night the little hen carefully took her family into the chicken house and brooded them.

They grew almost faster than weeds. Within a week they were no longer downy balls, but miniature birds whose wings were tipped with feathers that would mark their color at maturity. Busy all day long, they scooted about the yard chasing the bugs that crawled or flew there, and what had been the little yellow chick was still paramount among his brothers and sisters. His feathers had grown in red, as Al had known they would, and he was both bigger and faster than any of the others. When all eight chased a flying grasshopper, it was the little red rooster who overtook and devoured it. The eight chicks were seven weeks old when he definitely established his mastery over the rest.

Five of the eight were pullets, and as they grew they naturally formed a flock by themselves. Sometimes the three young stags mingled with them, and at others rambled where they wished. The little red rooster was almost full-feathered, with nubs of spurs and a well-developed comb, when he flew to the top of a stump, flapped his wings, and tried to crow. His voice broke in a squeaking falsetto, but instantly his two brothers accepted the challenge.

The little red rooster flew down to meet them, ruff bristling and neck extended, and when they were close enough he went into the air as he tried to rake them with his budding spurs. The two rose to meet him, flailing the air with baby wings and raking back. Then the little red rooster made an insane charge at both. Had they been big enough to do any serious damage, and had the little red rooster

carried out his original design, he would have died in that moment. But just before the final crash, he swerved to one side, went around instead of through and savagely attacked from the rear. It was a ruse born within him, a heritage from his mighty sire.

Al found them an hour later, still fighting. The heads of the two were battered and bloody, but the little red rooster was scarcely touched. Al picked up the two, and put them in one of the exercise pens, leaving the little red rooster as supreme commander of the brown hen's flock.

The little red rooster was four months old, a full-feathered, lithe stag, when Linn Magill came back. He drove up in his big car, and Al saw the Green Flash in a crate beside him. Linn Magill smiled, and again Al had the mental image of a dunghill rooster crowing over a great victory.

The oil man said, "I'm going to make a lot of money with this old boy this year."

"Yeah," Al agreed. "This year you are."

Linn Magill looked queerly at him. "What are you thinking about?"

"Fighting cocks."

"Those half dunghills?" Linn Magill waved a scornful hand toward the brown hen's flock.

"I didn't say," Al said. "So long, Magill."

WHEN the first snow fell, Al put the little red rooster in the big chicken house with the old Orpington, and after the first hard freeze he dubbed him. The little rooster's comb was a big and fine thing now, and his wattles were beginning to hang. Al took an ordinary pair of scissors and cut both comb and wattles off. Sitting on Al's lap, the little red rooster clucked wonderingly and shook his head to flip away the blood that ran down into his eyes. A dunghill, undergoing the same operation, would have squawked and frantically tried to escape. It was a mark of the game cock that they made no protest when hurt.

Al dusted the raw wounds with sulfanilimide and let the little red rooster hop to the floor. Again he shook the welling blood from his head, and went over to cluck threateningly at the Orpington hen. Al watched him, a proud thing whose burnished red feathers hugged his powerful body like a suit of armor, and whose long red tail made a perfect sickle curve. Attaining maturity, the little red rooster had not lived up to his early promise of heavy growth. He weighed about four pounds, but every ounce was pure muscle and slim bone.

Al left the chicken house. The only test of a cock, cock-men knew, was how he fought in the pit. Yet, you could not be around fighting chickens for twenty years without having some inkling of how they were going to fight when put in a pit, and the vision Al had carried for so long was not in his mind any more. It was in the chicken house with the Orpington hen.

When the snow finally melted, Al opened the chicken house door. Joyfully, the little red rooster flung himself out, rose to fly over the sun-warmed earth, and landed on the ridgepole of Al's house. He flapped his wings mightly, and bent his neck to crow. A brother, still shut in one of the smaller houses, answered the challenge, and the little red rooster bent his head to listen. Again he roared forth his willingness to fight anything that would fight, and again he was answered.

Al held out his hand and said, "Come on."

The little red rooster walked down the house's slanting roof and hopped from it to Al's wrist. Al carried him into the house and opened the box in which he had carefully stored all his fighting equipment. He took out two pairs of the tiny leather gloves that are used in practice fighting, and strapped one pair over the little red rooster's spurs. He flung the little rooster out the door, watched him fly to earth, then went into the smaller house to catch up and tie gloves on the other cock. Carrying him outside, he threw him over the fence.

The two ran toward each other, and met on a small knoll that reared itself halfway between them. With joyfully beating wings they rose to rake each other with harmlessly-padded spurs, and came to earth again. Al watched, a grin of delight on his face and a sparkle in his eye. Cock-fighting, some people said, was a cruel and bloody sport. But a game bird's only joy was fighting, and their only destiny was to battle others of their kind. Wounds and death meant nothing if the warrior lust could find satisfaction.

After ten minutes Al separated the pair and put the gray rooster back in the small house. But the little red rooster sparred with one or the other of his brothers every day and, as he fought, Al watched him slowly learn the tricks of fighting. Had he been wearing spurs, the little red rooster would easily have killed either of the other two. He knew how to dodge, and feint, and take advantage of every opening that presented itself.

When he was not sparring, the little red rooster had the run of the farm. He raced about, scratching in the dirt and forcing the fussy old Orpington to accompany him wherever he went. He was a dynamo of energy that just could not be contained or quieted and, watching this, Al knew that all was well. A fighting cock must train like a boxer, and develop wind, strength, and stamina. But the little red rooster's already hard body was growing iron-hard as he raced about and exercised.

It was the middle of summer when Al performed the next and final operation. The little

red rooster's spurs had grown into long, needle-sharp weapons that were in themselves terrible. But no cock can grow spurs as efficient as the steel ones with which they battle each other. Al sawed off the natural spurs, and tossed the little red rooster to the ground. For a few minutes he minced about, stepping very high and unnaturally. Then he flew to the ridge pole and crowed.

Al never understood how he knew the night had come. But he did know it. A lazy, late-summer moon seemed to lack enough energy to rise above the horizon. Gossamer mist-veils, the last expiring breath of summer, were silhouetted before it. Far off an owl hooted, and a lonely dog added his dismal bay to the night sounds. Al entered the chicken house, plucked the little red rooster from the roost, and cradled him in his arms.

"Come on," he said. "We're going."

AL KNEW the ways of both fighting cocks and the men who fought them, and he was very sure of the path he must take tonight. Cock-fighting was illegal, but no law could tell anyone who had ever watched a cock-fight, and partaken of its flavor, that they could never see or taste again. And this year, at the start of the season, the fights would be held in Sheneger's barn.

This was an old and crumbling structure with only one rutted trial leading from the highway. Those who came by car would be admitted by the man posted at the foot of the trail. Then he would swing his own car across it, and sound the horn if any police sought admittance. Likely none would. Camerton, the sheriff, owned game cocks himself.

But a man who had no car to drive to Sheneger's barn must walk, and to walk up a highway with a fighting cock in your arms was to invite trouble. Al strode down the ridges, letting the moon light his path while the little red rooster snuggled contentedly in his arms. When he had to cross a road he did so hurriedly. He walked through the patch of oak woods that grew on the ridge overshadowing Sheneger's barn, and looked down into the valley. There was nothing there, no light or glimmer of light to betray the presence of people, and Al smiled in the darkness. Sheneger's barn had windows, but boards over them were effective barriers to light.

Al walked down to the barn, and somebody said sharply, "What do you want here?"

"Hello, Jerry," Al said calmly.

"Al Carzot!" the guard ejaculated. "It's been so long since you've been around that we were beginning to think you'd taken root up there on your hill!"

"Let me in, will you?"

"Sure thing."

A small door opened to uncover a rectangle of yellow light, and Al instantly stepped inside. The door closed behind him and he looked at the men who were clearly revealed by the light of the lanterns overhead. In his arms, the little red rooster clucked inquisitively and sat up to see what was about. He knew there were other roosters in the barn.

A man wearing a gray shirt and gray slacks detached himself from the crowd about the pit and came forward with his right hand extended.

"Al!" he said. "I would have picked you up if I'd known you were coming!"

"I didn't know it myself until the last minute," Al Carzot said. "Is Linn Magill here?"

"Yes."

"Has he got his Green Flash?"

"Yeah. But he can't get any money on it."

"I'll give him some," Al Carzot said. "I'll give him as much as I got. Here's a little red rooster I'd like to see pitted against his Green Flash."

The man in the gray shirt and slacks turned to shout the length of the barn, "Hey, Linn! Here's Al Carzot with a match for your Green Flash! He says he'll bet everything he's got!"

Al sensed the ripple of excitement that ran through the men at the pit's side. They turned to face him, and he was aware of Linn Magill coming in his direction.

Without extending his hand, Al said clearly, "Hello, Linn."

"Why—uh . . . hello, Al."

"Surprised to see me?"

"Well, no. Glad to see you, Al."

Al chuckled, suddenly and spontaneously. He said, "The last time we fought, my gray nearly licked the Green Flash. Remember?"

"He killed your gray."

"He wouldn't have, if that lantern hadn't fallen," Al said. "I told you then that I had more breeding stock back in my chicken house, stock that could lick anything you have. Then, when I went home, my chicken house and all the stock had burned. All I had left was one old hen and one pullet chick. Remember?"

Al saw the sudden hard glances that were directed at the oil man, and was again aware of fear in his old enemy's eyes.

Linn Magill said nervously, "Look here, Al, if you're hinting—"

"I'm not hinting a thing," Al Carzot said. "I'm saying outright that I'll match this little red rooster against your Green Flash, and bet everything I have on him."

"How much do you have?" Linn Magill's eyes were very crafty.

"No money."

"Well, are you just in here four-flushing?"

"Hold on. How much is my place worth?"

"Well, I don't know. I—"

"It'd make a fine place for your chickens, Linn."

Linn Magill said savagely, "I'll put up a thousand dollars against it!"

"Fine! Now how much am I worth?"

"I—I don't understand you."

"I'll explain myself, Linn. You hire men. Suppose I bet you five years of my labor against say, another five thousand?"

"I—I don't . . ."

"What's the matter? Can't you take it?"

Linn Magill snapped his jaws together. "I'll take it! And if I win five years of your life, I don't envy you!"

"Neither do I," Al Carzot said carelessly.

But a great happiness and mighty elation was pounding through him as he climbed into the pit and laced the inch and a half spurs on the little red rooster. This seemed a fitting climax to all the things he had ever dreamed or thought about.

Al heard the pit master's "Bill your birds," and carried the little red rooster to the center of the pit to brush his bill against that of the Green Flash. Then, "The fight has started."

Al cast the little red rooster into the pit, and watched him warily advance to meet his mighty foe. The Green Flash rose in the air and feinted, but the little red rooster slipped to one side and met him when he came down. A couple of feathers floated in the air, and the Green Flash wheeled away from what would have been a dismembering blow. For a moment, ruffs bristling, they faced each other.

Parrying each other's spurs, they rose breast to breast in a wing-flailing sparring match that harmed neither. For ten minutes they battled about the pit. Then the Green Flash saw and took his opening.

He rose and started down, but changed his direction so that he landed squarely on top of the little red rooster when he dodged. His long spurs flashed, and the little red rooster's left wing dragged helplessly at his side. There was a concerted gasp from the spectators as the little red rooster turned to run. It was the cardinal sin of a pit cock. He had been hurt, and was showing cowardice. Knowing he had an easy kill, the Green Flash ran after him.

Suddenly and so swiftly that the watchers at the pit side could not be certain as to what had happened, the little red rooster wheeled about. He met the Green Flash almost head-on, and his legs flashed as he rose on his uninjured wing to drive his spurs in. The Green Flash staggered, fell, and tried to come back. But the little red rooster's spurs had struck home.

He flapped his good wing, crowed, and Al went into the pit to pick up his cock. He looked once at the Green Flash, and a tinge of regret crossed his mind. But there was no need to be sorry. It was the destiny of every game cock to be killed in the pit—and if they could have spoken that's what they would have wanted. Al cradled the little red rooster in his arms, and faced Linn Magill.

"I sure was lucky the night my chicken house burned," he said. "I saved one old Orpington hen and a brown chick, but the chick hatched from the last egg the Blue Hen laid, and she grew up to be a pullet. Then, remember, you walked the Green Flash with Joe Magruder? I walked my pullet the same place—it's a free country."

He slapped Linn Magill across the mouth, and the oil man stepped backwards.

"Don't hit me again!" he whimpered. "I'll pay up. Just don't hit me again!"

"Breeding does count," Al Carzot said contemptuously, as he turned to leave the barn.

CLEARED FOR ACTION

THE STORY THUS FAR:

IT IS the year 1798, with French-English rivalry on the high seas mounting daily. H. M. S. *Warwick,* after five years' duty in the Mediterranean, encounters a French frigate, *Audace,* in the Bay of Biscay on her way home to Portsmouth. CAPTAIN PAMPLIN, master of the English ship, engages the Frenchman and almost succeeds in beating his adversary. The fighting is bitter, however, and the *Warwick's* crew suffers many casualties. Her first lieutenant, young FARMERY GOSSELYN, is struck down by a raking broadside from the Frenchman, but revives in time to sight a new peril—another ship is fast approaching the combatants. The stranger, a larger ship than either the *Warwick* or the *Audace,* soon reveals her identity by sending aloft the hated tricolor, and Captain Pamplin, loath to commit his crew to an inevitable massacre against the now increased odds, quits the scene and resumes the voyage to Portsmouth and safety.

At Portsmouth, Gosselyn is granted an immediate sick leave in which to recover from his wounds and starts home for Sussex to see about a small inheritance left him by his mother. Thus he is not present at the court-martial held by the Lords of the Admiralty to inquire into the action fought with the *Audace,* nor is he able to defend his captain. Pamplin is found wanting in decision in bringing the engagement to a successful conclusion and is relieved of his command.

At Gosselyn Manor in Sussex, Gosselyn receives a cool reception from his brother, SIR EDWIN. There is no love lost between the brothers, Sir Edwin having packed Farmery off to sea as a mere lad, and Farmery now finds his brother even more unfriendly and the Manor running to seed from neglect. The one bright spot in his stay at the Manor is the presence of PHYLLIS, the younger sister of the baronet's wife. Farmery falls in love with her on the spot and she impetuously suggests that they be married immediately. Farmery broaches the subject of his inheritance to his

By R. W. DALY

brother who scornfully refuses to give him a cent, claiming that the money was used to provide Farmery with a patron for his naval career. Farmery storms out, furious, and leaves for Portsmouth, after being assured by Phyllis that she will wait for him and marry him on his return at which time, Farmery trusts, he will have accumulated some prize money and be in a position to afford a wife. At Portsmouth he is greatly surprised and honored to learn that he has been given command of the *Warwick*, and while bitterly regretting the unjust fate of her former captain, realizes that his new rank will enable him to wed Phyllis all the sooner.

The *Warwick*, assigned to the Leeward Station in the West Indies, still has the same officer complement and Gosselyn is delighted to find his former fellow-lieutenants, GRAHAM and WHITBY, now serving as his first and second officers. At St. Christopher the *Warwick* drops anchor and Gosselyn reports to ADMIRAL SIR HYDE PARKER. His orders are to cruise about Puerto Rico and familiarize himself with the navigational problems of the waters about the Leeward Station while the admiral lays plans against the day when he has sufficient force to undertake more satisfactory enterprises.

At dawn the next day, the *Warwick* gets under way and at nightfall, Gosselyn spies their first privateer, the Spanish schooner, *La Margarita*. The Spaniard is lying careened in a small inlet, apparently laid up for overhauling and nearby can be seen the earthenworks of a battery. The *Warwick* heaves to and Gosselyn, along with fifty seamen and marines, are lowered into cutters and silently approach the shore. After a brief skirmish, the Englishmen overpower the Spaniards guarding the fortifications. Carpenters soon right the Spanish vessel and bring her alongside the *Warwick*. Leaving Whitby in charge of a prize crew on the captured schooner, with orders to sail her to St. Kitts, Gosselyn and the crew on the *Warwick* continue their cruise. The sale of the Spaniard and her cargo, adjudged lawful prize, brings Gosselyn over four hundred pounds with which to found his fortune.

In the months following the *Warwick* does more than her share of patrolling the waters around the Leeward Station against merchantmen trying to elude the Britsh blockade and escape with their rich cargoes to French ports and, as prizes are taken, Gosselyn's fortunes increase. The bulk of the British West Indian Squadron is stationed at Barbados and thus when Sir Hyde Parker learns of the presence of a powerful French frigate, *L'Espoir*, in the vicinity, he is forced to send the *Warwick*, outclassed as she is, in pursuit. Gosselyn is greatly excited by his newest assignment since *L'Espoir* offers promise of bigger spoils than the *Warwick* has ever taken before, yet sobered by the thought of the Frenchman's greater size and power.

Cruising off the town of Ponce some days later, the *Warwick's* lookout spies a sail in the distance and Gosselyn prepares for action. Employing a measure of deception for safety's sake, the *Warwick's* young captain orders the Spanish colors to be hoisted. As the two vessels approach, each waiting for the other to make the first move, Gosselyn is struck anew with his adversary's formidable size and armament. The Frenchman fires the first shot, merely a request for the *Warwick* to identify herself. Gosselyn spars a few moments longer and the Frenchman, impatient by now, hurls a raking broadside. The time for sparring is now over and Gosselyn boldly directs the false Spanish colors to be lowered and the *Warwick's* true identity to be revealed. The battle is on!

PART II

FOUNTAINS of water sprang up to windward, fairly close aboard though spray did not hit the *Warwick*. If the French could remove another elevating quoin from their carriages, their next salvo would land home. This Gosselyn was inclined to dislike, and he eased off the wind, so that in the moments before the Frenchman reloaded to fire at the display of the hated white ensign, the *Warwick* gained precious yards to starboard, which placed the ensuing founts safely away from his hull.

Action being joined, Gosselyn took in his courses. For some time, he could not hope to win the weather gage, and that only if the enemy showed carelessness. Therefore, to have the maximum number of men serving the guns, he took in canvas until the *Warwick* moved under her topsails. This gave her mobility as well as the most efficient use of manpower. He was gratified by the promptness with which *L'Espoir* followed suit.

Trimming to the wind, he sought to claw within reach of grappling irons. The French captain, however, had a disinclination to be accommodating, only desiring to lay his shot on or over the *Warwick*, thus keeping his distance so that he could disable and destroy her at his leisure.

L'Espoir spat a full broadside. Aware that he was inside the limit of the Frenchman's guns, Gosselyn had his topside batteries standing by, muzzles depressed. He could, with an effort, watch the enemy shot tumble lazily through the bright sunlight, and at the precise moment before he calculated they would strike, he fired his secondary batteries. The *Warwick* was briefly smothered with smoke and sur-

rounded by sufficient splashes to make *L'Espoir's* gunners wonder if any of their missiles had hit the target. Gosselyn could have told them that he had heard several thumps in the hull beneath him.

His stratagem was annoying but sensible. Gunnery experts like to be able to gauge the effectiveness of their spotting, and when more shot boil the water about a target than they have fired, confusion naturally enters into their calculations.

The Frenchman, accordingly, fell away from the wind and bore down upon the *Warwick*. Her commander apparently didn't desire to expend ammunition which showed no perceptible results. He could accomplish his purpose as easily inside of a mile as he could outside, keeping his advantage of weather, though the sacrifice of space lessened his margin of safety. Having cut down the range to a point where he was more certain of his shot-fall, the Frenchman turned again to parallel the *Warwick's* course. His broadsides at the new range crossed the target, and merely counting on percentage probabilities, he could tell his shots were hitting.

Gosselyn sent for Graham who would not be needed below until the *Warwick* could come to grips.

"We've got to sail closer to the wind," Gosselyn said. "D'ye thing it would warrant slacking stays?"

Graham looked in dismay at the taut rigging on which he had spent so much effort. "No, sir," he said stoutly. "I'd shift guns first."

A bit rebuffed by the other's disapproval of his plan, Gosselyn was enough of a man to accept wisdom when asked for. Shifting the guns would produce a better sailing trim in the light air and would get him a shade closer to the wind. It was worth the effort. He had to close or accept combat at extreme range, which would have been against the grain of his training. British sea captains sought decision and conquest, not the expenditure of public funds. Their government risked everything to maintain the world's largest Navy at the expense of an Army. If other governments held different policies and subordinated sea to land forces, Englishmen could not allow their foes to conserve their ships. The Royal Navy adopted short range as the only practical way in which to make certain of continued domination.

Gosselyn looked toward the sun. "I'll give him an hour of this," he said grimly. "Perhaps we'll be lucky."

"He hasn't drilled his crew much," Graham observed comfortingly. "I'd flay our men if they tossed shot about like that."

"One hour," Gosselyn said again, "unless he gets better."

The leisurely cannonading of the enemy, at first ludicrous to the well-trained men of the *Warwick*, became increasingly worthy of respect as the French gunners acquired experience. The Republic of France had precious little powder to burn, and did not allow her captains to waste it in practice. As a consequence, their ships often made a pitiful showing when pitted against the Englishmen, who threw away sufficient ammunition in practice to sustain the French for a decade.

Little touched in the hull, the *Warwick* began to suffer casualties above her upper works. Here and there, a mast was wounded, holes sprang into the topsails, the mainyard was cut at its slings. Graham resenting the injury to his propulsion gear, volunteered to repair the damage. Believing that activity was an antidote for worry, Gosselyn gave his first lieutenant permission to fish the masts and lash the yard.

Graham took seamen from the carronades and nonchalantly set about his task. He was an old hand at the trade of working under fire. Either the Devil did not want him or he was a favored son, for in the time he was aloft, none of his men was hit. The masts fished, the mainyard caught up in its slings, and broken rigging spliced, Graham returned to the quarterdeck.

Gosselyn was fast losing patience. The Frenchman seemed to hang elusively at the original interval, but Graham, who had not watched her for every minute, was convinced she had lost at least two cables lengths. At that rate, nightfall would find *L'Espoir* untroubled.

"Captain," Graham said, "let me show him how to shoot."

"By all means!" Gosselyn said warmly.

Going below to his guns, Graham blasted complacency out of the French captain. Without his glass, Gosselyn could see that the first broadside was on the target. Graham was laying for the hull, and it was therefore reasonable to assume that those shot which did not smash short were entering *L'Espoir*.

A cheer roared up from the gundeck, a spontaneous expression of relief and exultation. Gosselyn was impressed by the change in the faces of the men on the weatherdeck long guns, and mercifully gave them orders to shoot. The men handling the stubby carronades with a scant range of two hundred yards were unable to add to the noise, yet they were solaced by the smell of British gunpowder and stolidly accepted their necessary silence.

Whitby ran up with a report that *L'Espoir's* unreturned mauling had cost the *Warwick* eleven men killed and wounded on the forward end of the gundeck. With the pestilential climate and ever-present infections, Gosselyn could count all eleven as lost. He showed no emotion, calmly accepting the report, but in his soul he bitterly mourned his casualties. The chances of war had slain or maimed them

and still he felt vaguely responsible. Perhaps he had somehow failed them. Other captains, he knew, were unaffected by battle losses; of these he could be jealous, despite the fact that he would never comprehend their attitude. At best, life to a seaman was wretched, though hope of being ultimately paid off made it tolerable.

Gosselyn hoped that his metal was wounding *L'Espoir,* and longed to lay the *Warwick* across her bow or counter and rake her with grape in revenge for his dead.

The afternoon was not his.

The French captain could easily tell by casual examination of shotholes from the *Warwick's* guns that his twenty-four pounders gave him an advantage, but he refused to act upon the information. As a chance hit brought down the *Warwick's* main topsail, the Frenchman almost immediately put about, clapping on sail. Gosselyn set his canvas and brought his starboard battery into use. The Frenchman was obviously disinterested in continuing the action, having been willing enough to remain only while his were the only guns that spoke; he had the weather and the ship with which to escape.

Gosselyn had the grim satisfaction of knowing that they had beaten too far to the east for *L'Espoir* to make Jobos, scant comfort for the afternoon's grim activity. Graham was already busy with his tackle, hauling a spar up to replace the shattered topmast. However, even had he completed the repair promptly, Gosselyn knew there was no keeping a French-built ship engaged by a clumsy English vessel, when the Frenchman had the wind.

AS THE French frigate gracefully sailed away from the clumsy *Warwick,* he sadly passed the word to cease firing. Smoke-blackened figures collapsed in exhaustion beside their hot guns. Powder monkeys scurried to refill shot racks and powder tubs in case *L'Espoir* returned. Here and there a gunner methodically sponged out his piece or abstractedly began to scrape off the blistered paint. A general weariness, born of exertion and relaxed nerves, settled over the *Warwick.*

Gosselyn ordered the galley fires to be relit and, while the men waited for their food, issued a double tot of grog. He remained on deck while his officers supped, watching Graham, half-naked, struggle with his rigging. He had a heavy press of canvas, but lacked the heels of the Frenchman, who gradually faded into the dusk. When Whitby came topside, Gosselyn turned over the watch and, leaving word that he wished to see his first lieutenant after his work was done, went below to his cabin.

Alone, and no longer constrained to preserve his dignity, Gosselyn cursed long and bitterly. He felt better afterward, and suffered his servant to arrange the furniture and prepare for his supper. He peeled a Cuban orange, and when the sweet taste brought to mind his wager with Mr. Ranier, he promptly sent a small basketful to the orlop with his compliments. Mr. Ranier would now have no difficulty in convincing his companions that he was not merely spinning a yarn.

Gosselyn deferred dining until Graham was able to join him, and by then had regained sufficient control to enjoy his food without reference to the afternoon's encounter. When they had finished the meal, and commenced on wine and *La Margarita's* cigars, he found himself able to discuss dispassionately the probable movements of their quarry.

"Unless I miss my guess," Graham said, "we hurt him. If he's hurt, he'll need overhauling."

Gosselyn nodded. "Exactly," he agreed. "Now where would you go if you were French, far north of your bases and required a bit of work?" He gestured toward a chart of the West Indies hung upon a bulkhead. "Puerto Rico or any Spanish possession? I think not."

Graham did not venture an opinion. He dealt only in the verities of canvas and ships. Conjecture about enemy movements he left to more speculative persons. Besides, he could tell that Gosselyn had already reached a conclusion, and it would take more effort to shake it than Graham felt capable of at the time. He wanted only to sleep.

"No," Gosselyn said, answering his own question, and understanding his subordinate's reticence. "The French and Spanish don't sleep well together. If I were a *capitaine de frégate,* I doubt if I would care to bring my injured ship into a Spanish port. I'd go there only if I were completely fit, and ready for any unpleasantness that might occur. Otherwise, I'd lay a course for a neutral."

"I see," Graham murmured sleepily. "St. Thomas?"

"St. Thomas," Gosselyn affirmed. "What think you of this canary sack?"

"It's closing my eyes," Graham mumbled wearily.

"I'll see you in the morning," Gosselyn replied, smiling kindly. "Good night."

After Graham withdrew, Gosselyn lit a fresh cigar, wrote a dispatch about the action, and went up to his cot by the mizzen.

Six days later, the *Warwick* sighted Signal Hill of St. Thomas, and then the flat tops of Hawk and Fortuna. Sailing along the thinly wooded shoreline, Gosselyn picked up the ridge of Hamel Island. Turning the point below the guns of the battery opposite Rupert Rock, he entered the fairway, taking in sail as the *Warwick* pointed her bowsprit toward the town built at the foot of the mountain range. As the harbor opened to view, he saw the frigate *L'Espoir,* whose captain had either the courtesy

or impudence to fire a national salute upon the *Warwick's* entrance. What with the salute due the Danish flag, the visit involved the outlay of considerable gunpowder. Gosselyn kept his irritation to himself, selected an anchorage, and let go his best bower.

When the *Warwick* swung to her moorings, he went below to await developments. Graham boldly remained on deck, and with his glass had little trouble in finding traces of his gunnery in the Frenchman's hull. He was satisfied with the results.

A launch put out from Government Pier, carrying a portly little Danish boarding officer, who was not too proud to be hoisted aboard the *Warwick* in a boatswain's chair. Perspiring heavily, he greeted Graham in passable if distorted English, and was promptly escorted to the captain.

Gosselyn speedily got through the arrangements necessary to water his ship and purchase fresh vegetables, but did nothing to relieve the Dane's obvious embarrassment about the delicate international crisis involved in the presence of two hostile men-of-war. He merely inquired how long *L'Espoir* would be permitted to remain, now that the *Warwick* had arrived, and received, by way of answer, an invitation to dine with the governor that evening. Gravely, Gosselyn accepted, then, with due ceremony, escorted the boarding officer to the entry port and saw him safely lowered away into his launch.

Dismissing the sideboys, Graham looked at his captain, an unspoken question on his face. The harbor was crowded with little craft, among which the pair of frigates appeared gigantic. Like champions of old, they would be expected to clash, if only for the chivalric prowess of men-at-arms. Graham wanted to know if the sanguine merchantmen would be disappointed.

"Tonight I dine with the governor," Gosselyn said. "You will keep a sharp watch while I'm gone. The fellow might try to slip away."

He underestimated his foe.

THAT evening, the fellow sat opposite him at table. Capitaine du Bois was a charming gentleman of the lesser nobility and, as an educated man, spoke insulting English. Thus the adversaries could communicate ideas, though they were far from compatible by temperament or inclination. Gosselyn fidgeted through the small talk necessitated by the presence of the governor's family, and earnestly wished to reach an agreement of mutual satisfaction. Fully aware of Gosselyn's wishes, du Bois, perversely, insisted upon explaining to the ladies at great length why he had accepted the republican government of France. He was a Frenchman, he said, and when France was at war one didn't have politics.

All this Gosselyn considered pointless. He did not care if du Bois was the Dauphin or a shoemaker. Du Bois had a frigate and Gosselyn wanted to know what the Frenchman intended to do with her. Finally, he said so.

Du Bois laughed at him. The Danish governor, uncertain of his English, was instinctively aware that the merry du Bois would more likely be conversant with wit than the sour-faced Gosselyn, and joined the laughter. This failed to please Captain Gosselyn, who managed to guard his peace and repeat his question in a temperate manner.

"When are you coming out, du Bois?"

The Frenchman shrugged delicately. "I am in love with this place, *monsieur*," he replied. "Why should I leave?"

Contemptuously glaring at his foe, Gosselyn checked a salty rejoinder, and turned to the governor. "Sir," he said, "I respect your neutrality, and will leave St. Thomas before noon tomorrow. I request that you compel Captain du Bois to do the same. The law of nations gives us little time in your port."

This the Dane could fathom. "Yes," he agreed soberly, "*Monsieur le capitaine* must leave tomorrow. I shall otherwise be forced to intern him."

Du Bois intimated with a smile at the governor's wife and daughters, that he would find such confinement delightful. Gosselyn possessed little diplomacy, and made some staunch enemies for England by informing du Bois that the *Warwick* could be met three miles outside of the channel.

"No doubt," said the Frenchman negligently. Then, to Gosselyn's annoyance, he ignored the matter and commenced to speak to the governor about Copenhagen, which he had once visited. Fuming, Gosselyn nonetheless took warning from the enraptured faces of the overfed ladies, and waited until they withdrew before again broaching the subject burning at his vitals.

"Du Bois," he said grimly, "we may as well end our affair tomorrow, else I will track you through the Indies."

"Gallantly expressed, *mon ami*," retorted the Frenchman, "but I will subdue you at my convenience, not yours. Since our encounter, I have a most important obligation to discharge, and cannot accommodate your childish exhuberance to be conquered."

"No doubt," Gosselyn sneered, "you recalled this important obligation as soon as I commenced fire."

"*Morbleu!*" Du Bois laughed. "Think you I fear a hulk of salvaged flotsam?"

Gosselyn flushed at the condescending tone with which du Bois referred to the *Warwick*. Perhaps she wasn't the fastest sailer in the Royal Navy, but she was his ship, and held

his loyalty. None could insult her in his presence. He bethought him of his hanger out in the hall and half rose to deliver a challenge to personal combat.

"If you weren't afraid to fight, sir," he said hotly, "you would do more credit to your country. I believe our swords are conveniently nearby, and we have a garden."

Alarmed by the belligerent tone, the governor sought to redeem the honor of his first guest, and still prevent a duel. "It is true, Captain Gosselyn," he vowed. "Monsieur du Bois cannot oblige you. He has moneys for the garrisons of the islands, and cannot risk them."

Springing to his feet, du Bois shook off his indolence, and glared at his host. Forgotten was his suavity. "You fool!" he muttered viciously. "The money was a secret learned by you from my papers in execution of your office. What have you done? Every pirate in England will hunt me!"

Smiling his first genuine smile of the evening, Gosselyn calmly reached for his wine glass. "Not every pirate, Captain," he rebuked mildly. "Just one. Myself."

He looked at the governor, who sat aghast in amazed, outraged silence. "Your health, sir," he said, raising the glass. "My thanks for an enjoyable evening." Putting down the wine glass, he bowed to the irate Frenchman. "I will await your convenience, Captain, either myself or my ship. You know where to find both. Outgunned though I am, I trust you will not disappoint me."

Du Bois declined to answer.

Jauntily, Gosselyn departed and strolled down to the pier, where his boat crew awaited him. He was so content with the turn of events, he refrained from upbraiding the coxswain for letting the men get out of hand, as was obvious from the odors of rum on the men's breaths.

Well before noon, having no word from du Bois, Gosselyn got under way to cruise hopefully to the rendezvous. Graham at his side, he watched *L'Espoir* set sail upon the stroke of eight bells. They could see people on the hills, camped to witness the combat. Word had traveled about the island and lured spectators away from their normal pursuits.

If the men in the *Warwick* felt like Roman gladiators, they were soon disappointed. Du Bois skilfully brought *L'Espoir* out of the harbor, and hugged the coast, unashamedly running away from the English frigate, which, being outside territorial waters, was hopelessly left behind. Stolidly, Gosselyn moved to the west to follow, aware that he could hardly overtake his foe, yet resolved to pursue him until the *Warwick* fell apart. There would someday be another harbor, if the seas kept them apart, and that harbor might not be neutral. For that, he would pray.

A half hour's sail brought *L'Espoir* to the precipitous ridge on the western end of St. Thomas. Here, du Bois set a northerly course, disappearing from view behind the bulge of a hill.

Gosselyn disdained to follow, accepting the movement as designed to deceive him. Du Bois had first been found off Puerto Rico, and no doubt had urgent business there. Du Bois might once again fall in with the *Warwick* off Ponce. Gosselyn's success in predicting the flight to St. Thomas made him absolutely certain of his prophecy.

In this, however, perhaps for the good of his soul, he was wrong. On the second day of a vigil off the Spanish port, the *Warwick* hailed the cutter *Sparrow*, which had news to shake Gosselyn's conceit.

The *Sparrow* was fleeing from a large French frigate which, accompanied by two corvettes, had run afoul of her three evenings previous. Gosselyn's questions convinced him that *L'Espoir* was bound with transports on an invasion of an English island. The cutter's captain only knew her original course, which was easterly, and no more, since *L'Espoir* had made a playful lunge at him.

Gosselyn did not hurt his junior's feelings by suggesting that du Bois had merely desired to set the cutter in flight, contenting himself with the request that the *Sparrow* keep watch on Puerto Rico, while the *Warwick* went to trail *L'Espoir*. This, the *Sparrow's* captain was pathetically happy to do, and Gosselyn bade him farewell.

CHAPTER V

CLEARED FOR ACTION

OF ALL French names known in the West Indies during Revolutionary times, none was more odious to the British than that of Victor Hugues. This was due to many acts of that civil commissionaire whose leadership inspired revolt among the natives and slaves of the colonies, with attendant pillage, rape and murder. The British might have forgiven M. Hugues for being the inspiration of such barbarism, because they had not always themselves been too nice in their methods of colonial development, but M. Hugues was down in their books for a most unforgivable deed.

In April, 1794, a force under Sir John Jervis took Guadaloupe away from the French. By September of the same year, Victor Hugues landed, and in a series of well-fought battles, threw the British back into their ships. Thus, the rich West Indian island remained in the hands of its original masters. The British had very earnestly coveted Guadaloupe, and resented its loss.

Fortified by this success, the civil commission-

aire then impudently undertook to assail the possessions of Great Britain, arousing the marauding spirit in his countrymen who continued, even after his star had fallen, trying to hamstring the Anglo-Saxon. No island was safe from a sudden descent by Republican forces. They failed to make important or permanent conquests, but they did put the British to considerable effort and annoyance.

As the *Warwick* beat to windward, Gosselyn manfully abandoned his presumption of infallibility, and took Graham into consultation, so that both of their brains could concentrate on the problem of *L'Espoir's* destination. Mercifully refraining from reminding his captain of the latter's didactic opinion that du Bois had gone to Puerto Rico, and with a right good will, Graham put his common sense at Gosselyn's disposal.

They finally agreed, for several reasons, that Anguilla or Aquita was the objective. First, the ships with du Bois were small, and thus his land force would be small. Second, his course had been east in a latitude close to that of Anguilla. Third, both islands were defenseless, and both had small populations.

Anguilla proved to be unharmed, and they resolutely pushed eastward.

When the masthead shouted down to the deck that the cone of Sugar Hill was broad on the bow, Gosselyn knew that in four hours he would know definitely if two heads were better than one. However, since it was well past noon, he decided against running up to the island with little sun left in the day, electing instead to maintain bare steerageway throughout the night. In this way he could arrive with the dawn and have a full day to deal with *L'Espoir*.

He was on deck before the light came in the east and, after a few impatient minutes, went up the shrouds with Graham to have a better look at Aquita. As the paling east crept about the horizon, he could make out the tiny island. To him, it seemed almost covered with smoke, as though it were volcanic. Graham vouched for his vision, swearing that it wasn't fog.

With his glass, Gosselyn could soon distinguish the masts of two ships, neither with the rake of *L'Espoir*. Disappointed, he asked Graham if he was of the same mind, and received corroboration. Unless du Bois had reset his rigging, *L'Espoir* was not at Aquita. Her immediate whereabouts, however, faded in importance to Gosselyn, whose interest in the two ships present was as great as the amount of smoke hanging over the island.

The harbor of Aquita is on its western end, and so Sugar Hill often blankets the canvas of vessels there moored. Loyally British, Sugar Hill put its back up to the easterly wind, and refused to assist the French in getting under way.

Cleared for action, his crew at its guns, Gosselyn skirted Queen Anne Shoal, and brought the *Warwick* into sight of the customhouse on Pearson Dock. He returned to his quarterdeck, and ordered the white ensign broken from the foretruck, there being no purpose now in hiding his national character.

The appearance of the colors magically brought swarms of men into the rigging of the two ships. Sails were hastily unbrailed and shaken out.

Three miles distant, Gosselyn could clearly see the source of the smoke. Houses and sugar fields were blazily lustily. He cursed angrily. The French were merely raiding, instead of invading for permanent occupation. He now had a band of pirates to deal with rather than warriors. He drew a distinction between the two, overlooking the tolerance which his countrymen had extended to Hawkins and Drake.

At two miles, Gosselyn saw men scurrying to boats, hastening from all directions of the island. Other boats desperately strove to reach the ships.

He smiled grimly. The French were worried, and with good reason.

At one mile, the outermost ship commenced firing at him. Gosselyn counted her ports, rated her as a twenty, her companion a mere sixteen. In relation to his ship, they stood as the *Warwick* did to a seventy-four. While he could not destroy them with a single broadside, he could fight almost with impunity, like an armored knight against an unmailed foot soldier. The *Warwick's* stout sides were almost impenetrable to the nine and six-pounder shot of the transports, though grape was always risky.

He disdained to run out his guns as he bore down on the entrance to the channel. His ports would be opened when he was ready to deal out justice. Until then, he wished to examine the misdeeds of the raiders.

Six hundred yards from the entrance, the water shoaled sufficiently for him to anchor. Putting a spring on the cable, he doused sail and let go. As the anchor plunged into the sandy bottom and brought the spring down with it, he paid off to a proper scope, and rode to the bower. Then, heaving round on the spring, which led around the stern forward to the anchor, the leverage moved the *Warwick* majestically against the wind until her broadside dominated the town of Aquita.

CALMLY, unhurriedly, he swept his glass across the scene before him, noting the havoc wrought by the French irregulars, and controlled his anger to the point where it was his servant rather than his master. To Graham, below at the guns, he sent down the order to prepare to shoot.

Square gunports were hauled out and up. Wooden wheels rumbled over decks as the men

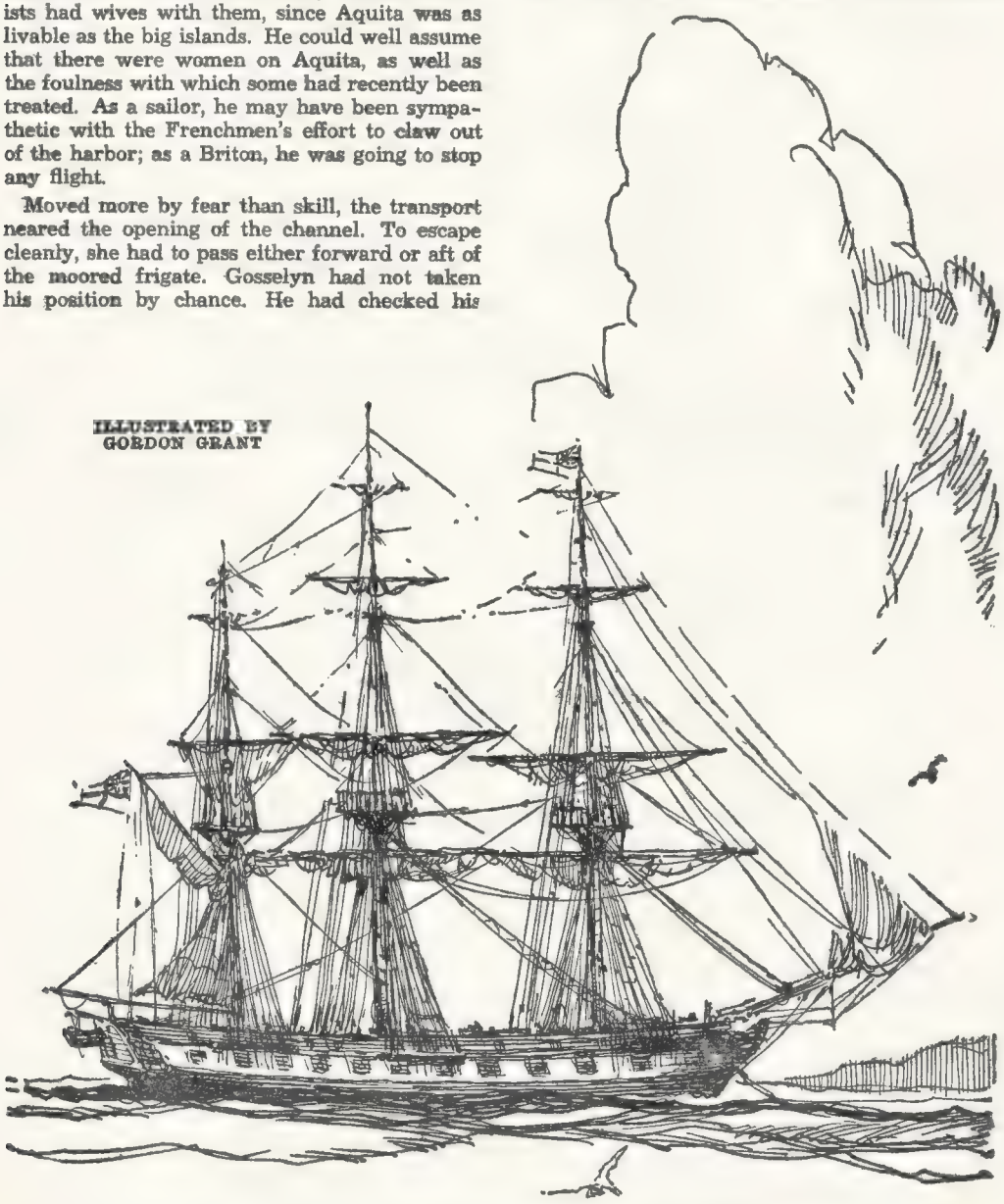
at each gun tugged at tackle to propel the carriage forward. Frenchmen could now look upon the wrath of England.

Ignoring the men in the boats, the ship nearest the *Warwick* slipped her cable and courageously essayed escape. Imperturbably, Gosselyn watched her seamen struggle to get a belly in their sails. He knew that many British colonists had wives with them, since Aquita was as livable as the big islands. He could well assume that there were women on Aquita, as well as the foulness with which some had recently been treated. As a sailor, he may have been sympathetic with the Frenchmen's effort to claw out of the harbor; as a Briton, he was going to stop any flight.

Moved more by fear than skill, the transport neared the opening of the channel. To escape cleanly, she had to pass either forward or aft of the moored frigate. Gosselyn had not taken his position by chance. He had checked his chart, and knew to a yard where the *Warwick* lay, having plotted a fix from bearings on various landmarks.

The transport was doomed.

With his telescope, he could observe hope illuminating brown faces, as the ship won free of Sugar Hill's grip, and her sails puffed full. Never were men more deluded if they thought



ILLUSTRATED BY GORDON GRANT

With a shudder, the transport abruptly stopped. Then, slowly, all of her masts were carried away under the press of canvas and shock, falling in a confused tangle.

in a thin hull they could run a gauntlet of eighteen pounders.

The French skipper chose to pass under the *Warwick's* counter, rather than risk fouling the frigate's anchor cable and swinging her into him. Set for that tack, with no room or time to alter his decision, he drove madly for freedom.

Blandly, Gosselyn gave the order to pay out on the anchor cable and spring. The *Warwick* perforce drifted backwards, until Gosselyn trumpeted the command that checked her movement. With every yard that the frigate fell astern, the transport modified her course.

Wondering French faces stared at this strange English frigate which did not gobble up a helpless enemy ship. Disbelief, stark and fascinated, grew into joy when it became manifest that the frigate's guns were still trained on the harbor and not following the transports. The raiders asked not whence came the miracle, but rejoiced in their salvation, which was unfortunate.

Perhaps the transport's skipper knew, and had known from the instant the *Warwick* began to pay off on her lines. If so, he gambled; though there was really nothing else for him to do, it was charitable to credit him with perceiving the danger. When the *Warwick's* guns remained steadily on the town after the transport had passed the limit of their traverse, the French captain, perhaps seeing a ray of hope, sought to diminish the risk by steering for a point as close to the *Warwick's* stern as he dared.

He lost, as Gosselyn had intended him to lose. Channels are made by shoals and obstructions. The *Warwick* lay athwart a section of the chan-

nel that was critical for the Frenchman, since rocks that may once have been part of Aquita lay scant yards aft of the frigate's rudder.

With a shudder, the transport abruptly stopped. Her sails remained full, yet she was stationary. Then, slowly, all of her masts were carried away under the press of canvas and shock, falling in a confused tangle. Half her passengers sprawled stunned upon her decks. Gradually, the transport began to heel to port, as the sea hungrily rushed into her ripped bottom.

"Mr. Ranier," Gosselyn said, "go slack the spring."

"Aye, aye, sir!" shouted the youngster, running to the men at the after mooring cleat.

As the spring slacked off, the *Warwick* was again at the command of wind and current. She swung easily to starboard, and inexorably as she swung, her larboard battery came into line with the stricken transport, less than a hundred yards away. The movement was ominously menacing. With grape and canister Gosselyn could obliterate every trace of French life. The raiders were absolutely at his mercy.

Quickly, the transport's captain bethought himself of hauling down his tricolor and raising the British flag.

The entire affair, from the time she got under way to the time she struck, had taken a bare five minutes.

Gosselyn sent for Gunner Harrison. Cap in hand, the wiry veteran promptly answered the summons. "Go to the chasers," Gosselyn said. "If any boat attempts to leave that transport, destroy it."

Harrison had been thinking, without saying so, that gunfire should at one time or another enter into any self-respecting fight, and was grateful for his assignment. He would guarantee that some noise would be made before day's end, even if his captain sank the second ship without employing the great guns. As the gunner went about his mission, Gosselyn knew he need no longer concern himself with the transport's crew, and devoted his entire attention to the remaining Frenchman.

Heaving round on the anchor cable, he weighed and stood into the harbor, having sufficient momentum after the wind deserted him to glide close to his target. Again using a spring on the cable, so he could control his battery, he moved the *Warwick* against the current until her muzzles bore.

"Surrender!" he roared across at the transport.

In the confusion of shouting from her deck, he could find no willingness to strike the tricolor. He rested there for a full minute, giving the Frenchmen a decent interval in which to select his answer, and called again. Gesticulations of defiance and surrender meant nothing to him. Her flag still flew.

He sent word down to Graham to fire.

When the smoke of the broadside swirled away in the lazy air, the second transport could no longer be described as a ship. The heavy shot from the eighteen pounders had torn through her fragile hull, beating in whole sections of planking and riddling her beyond salvage. The water was filled with moaning, thrashing men. The boats between the ships were capsized from the force of muzzle blast.

A simple military consideration obliged Gosselyn, despite his personal distaste, to fire a final blast of canister. The French in the water equaled his four hundred men, and he was unable to risk hand-to-hand combat should they, in desperation, swarm aboard the *Warwick*. The canister withered any valiant hopes, and the Frenchmen willingly kept away from the frigate and sought refuge in the wreckage of their ship.

Lowering his cutters, he sent Thatcher and his fifty marines to Pearson's Dock, where, rifles at the ready, they received the submission of the Frenchmen who struggled out of the maelstrom of death. Gosselyn dispatched Whitby in a longboat, armed with swivels, to stand watch over the ship's survivors.

Within the hour, he had more than six hundred prisoners. When the last man had been secured, he landed a division of seamen under Graham, and himself entered his gig to go ashore. At his approach, Thatcher briskly trotted his marines off on a search for any stray raiders who might have eluded him. Thatcher, Gosselyn thought approvingly, left little to chance.

A DEPUTATION of colonists met the gig at the dock, and bowed to Gosselyn as he climbed onto the rough, sea-weathered planking. Their gratitude was simply expressed, yet Gosselyn suddenly felt very inadequate. The occasion called for a hero, which he was far from being, for heroes rise above obstacles, and he had done nothing that any other captain of a frigate would not have been able to do, given the same circumstances. His modesty, therefore, was unassumed. He could understand the colonists' emotions upon being delivered from unwelcome guests, but there was such a thing as too much gratitude.

The civil magistrate, an old gentleman of quality named Mr. Hendricks, represented his fellow islanders when he took Gosselyn's hand and vowed that his name would ever be foremost in the history they taught their children. "We can never forget, Captain. You saved us from murder and rapine."

Awkwardly, Gosselyn accepted the sincere thanks, and shook off attention from himself by asking Mr. Hendricks to relate what had occurred prior to his arrival.

"They appeared two days ago," said the planter. "They flew British colors and sailed into the harbor. Once within, they raised their accursed tricolor. Wantonly, they began to shoot at our houses and buildings. Naturally, this gunfire aroused us, all over the island. Seizing what weapons we had, we of the militia hastened to our drill field. Alas, the field, as you see it, was directly under their guns. They used grape."

"How many of you were in the militia?" Gosselyn interrupted.

"Seventy, sir. We have less than a thousand souls on Aquita; seventy able-bodied men seemed to be a good and adequate force."

"Where is your cannon?" Gosselyn asked, squinting in the bright sunlight.

"We have no ordnance, Captain," Mr. Hendricks replied, then fell politely silent.

Gosselyn flushed at the planter's hesitation. "Pray forgive my questions," he said. "I wished to know your defenses, in order to take measures against a recurrence of this event."

Mr. Hendricks nodded to indicate that he was unoffended. "After dispersing our force, they landed an overwhelming number of men. We fought in small groups until most of our militia was slaughtered. The brutes had an easy conquest, and after they had received our surrender, their leader permitted them to loot our homes, and worse. They burned what they could not carry. They were still looting when you came. That is all."

"Sirs," said Gosselyn, his blue eyes steady upon the faces before him, "there are certain crimes which no law can condone. My men will form the prisoners in ranks, and your wronged women will have an opportunity to name their attackers. These I will punish." He looked at Mr. Hendricks. "I leave it to you in your legal capacity to judge the cases. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Mr. Hendricks rejoined heartly.

"Excellent," Gosselyn said. "Now, do you require anything I may be able to furnish for your relief?"

The deputation of planters emphatically replied that the *Warwick* had already done more than they could have hoped for.

"I only regret, Captain, that you did not arrive in time to bring justice to their leader," murmured Mr. Hendricks. "He sailed late yesterday."

Gosselyn had been watching white-shirted marines deploying on the sides of Sugar Hill. He spun about to face the magistrate. "There was another ship?" he demanded.

"A large frigate," Mr. Hendricks answered. "She was named *L'Espoir*."

Masterfully, Gosselyn choked down his bitterness. Had he not delayed his assault until dawn, he would have caught his foe in the act of leaving Aquita, where the shoals would have given du Bois little sea room in which to choose between combat or flight. Quietly, he obtained particulars of *L'Espoir's* share in the pillage. With her battery, she had covered the irregular troops and sailors from Santo Domingo, and had efficiently knocked apart houses in which resistance developed. Her crew had been outstanding in their predilection for rape, behavior more heinous than the conduct of the irregulars, since they were subject to the discipline of an organized service of a civilized nation.

"I regret not meeting with that ship," Gosselyn said sincerely, when the story was told. "Perhaps I will find her some day. In the meantime, I suggest you conduct your investigation."

The magistrate acquiesced, and departed with his companions.

Turning to speak to Graham, Gosselyn relieved his feelings with a few passionate oaths, which Graham echoed with even saltier expressions. Then, having disposed of their bad luck, they discussed the best method of assisting Hendricks. That out of the way, they watched Thatcher's marines moving among the homes on Sugar Hill.

"You know," Gosselyn remarked reflectively, "this place could do with some guns on that ridge of land up there. They would command the entrance quite well."

"So they would," Graham agreed, after careful scrutiny.

"Well, now," Gosselyn went on, "we have guns which will rust away on that wreck. We have men who owe these islanders something. We will be here at least another day for the trials. Why not combine all three, and present these good people with a battery?"

"Why not?" Graham repeated.

"Make it so," the captain of the *Warwick* ordered, and went to the town hall to prepare for the execution of justice.

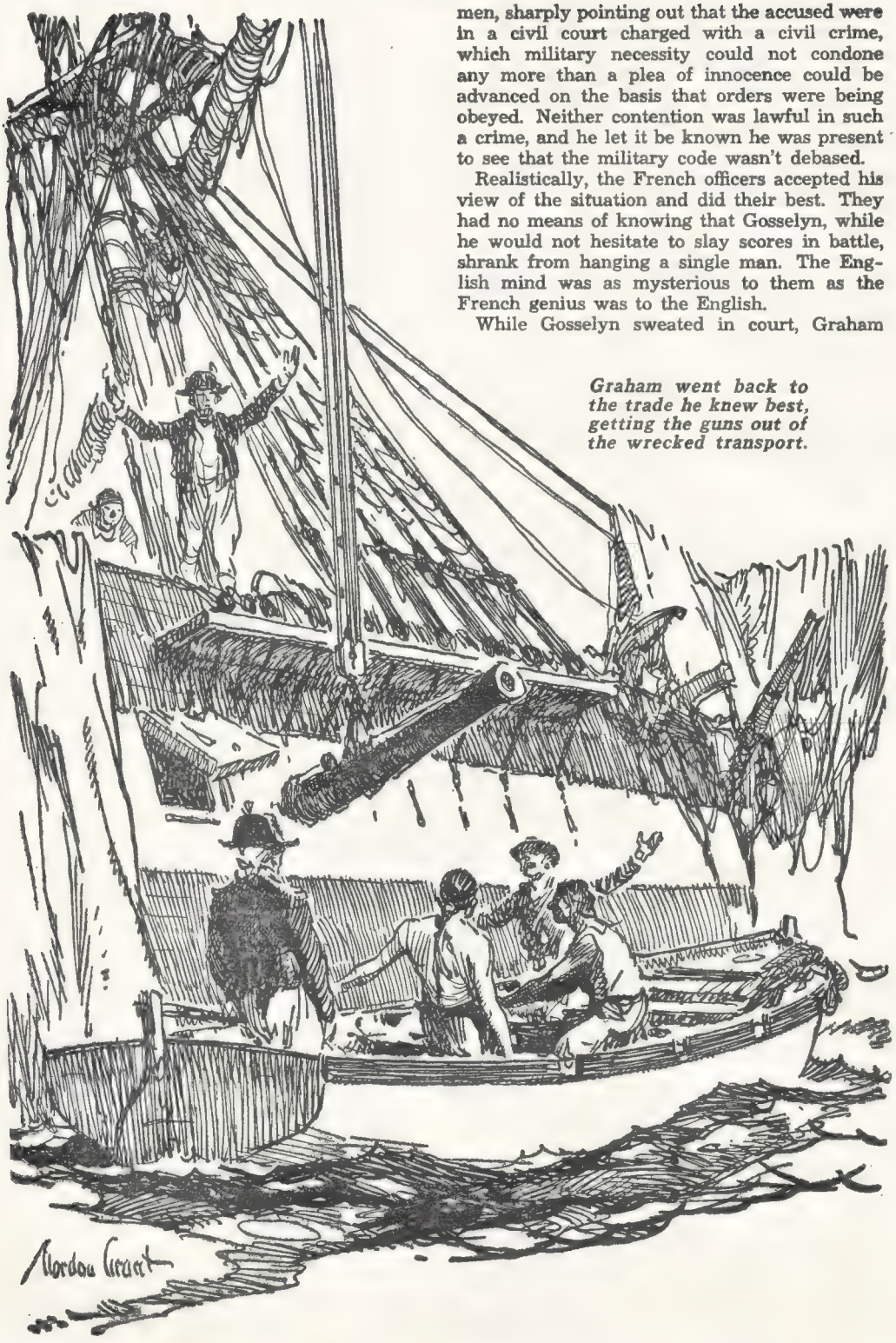
THE next two days were busy. Mr. Hendricks arraigned nineteen prisoners. Although he disliked the entire business, Gosselyn was in court for all cases, and formed his own conclusions about the evidence presented, so that in his mind only eleven of the accused were unquestionably guilty. The magistrate agreed that either innocence or reasonable doubt existed in the other instances, and did not object when Gosselyn sent them to work on the battery. The guilty prisoners he informed of their impending punishment and advised to take counsel with their Creator.

In Gosselyn's opinion, the trials had been fair. In no instance did he accept a maiden's word as the lone weight of evidence, unless his surgeon, Dr. Rogers, assured him that there were tangible signs of rape. His attitude, while it may have irritated some of the colonists, was nonetheless in keeping with his conscience, and with that he was obliged to live. He permitted the French colonial officers to defend their

men, sharply pointing out that the accused were in a civil court charged with a civil crime, which military necessity could not condone any more than a plea of innocence could be advanced on the basis that orders were being obeyed. Neither contention was lawful in such a crime, and he let it be known he was present to see that the military code wasn't debased.

Realistically, the French officers accepted his view of the situation and did their best. They had no means of knowing that Gosselyn, while he would not hesitate to slay scores in battle, shrank from hanging a single man. The English mind was as mysterious to them as the French genius was to the English.

While Gosselyn sweated in court, Graham



Graham went back to the trade he knew best, getting the guns out of the wrecked transport.

labored on the battery. With a seaman's eye as to the position which would prove most harmful to him should he have to force the harbor, Graham laid out an earthenworks fortification. Thatcher, being a marine, naturally saw a better location, and annoyed the first lieutenant with learned criticism full of escarpments, enfilades, defilades, revetments and all the jargon of the soldier until, at last, Graham gave up the job. Thatcher gleefully took over, promising works as impregnable as any of Vauban's forts, instead of a simple transplanting into soil of a ship's broadside.

Graham gladly went back to the trade he knew best, getting the guns out of the wrecked transport. Nine-pounders being considerably less bulky than the *Warwick's* eighteens, her seamen were inclined to be almost casual in the manner in which they manhandled them into the boats. However, when it came time to mount them on Sugar Hill, they were only too happy to let gangs of swearing French drag the pieces up the slope.

When fourteen of the cannon had been emplaced in Thatcher's pair of mutually supporting redoubts, Graham was compelled to grant that the western end of the island would be difficult to storm. Thatcher, instead of decently accepting the praise like a gentleman, glowed and brazenly suggested that a battery should also be made on the eastern side of the hill, in the event that an enemy sensibly decided to land in the rear of the town. Graham's refusal did not deter the enthusiastic marine from insubordinately broaching the plan to Gosselyn, who, since the islanders had entreated him to let them show their gratitude to his crew by a day or two's entertainment, had two reasonable motives for delaying his departure. To neither party did he intimate that the *Warwick* would remain at Aquita primarily in hopes that *L'Espoir* might return.

So the condemned Frenchmen were straightforwardly hung, Thatcher got to work on his second battery, the colonists feted both watches of the frigate, and the Santo Dominicans got the justifiable impression that the English were very savage indeed, hanging people in the morning and feasting in the afternoon.

While everyone about him was contenting himself with his activities, Gosselyn undertook a venture in espionage. To their fearful surprise, he invited the captains of the beaten ships to sup with him alone in his cabin.

Very basely, he served them rum, for which he had the stomach, and while his men caroused ashore, Gosselyn began to drink the Frenchmen under the table for the sake of his country.

Before the captains collapsed, Gosselyn knew that du Bois had bought the troops from Santo Domingo for twenty thousand gold louis. His plans had been to land the troops and then reconnoiter the seas about Anguilla preparatory to another raid. The transports were to have rendezvoused with *L'Espoir* the very hour Gosselyn had hung the convicted Frenchmen. Obviously, Captain du Bois had been disappointed. Where he would go upon failure to meet the transports, the captains did not know. Doubtless, however, he would find troops elsewhere; his mission was that of a guerrilla, and he had great funds. They thought it unlikely that he would return to Aquita.

At that, Gosselyn poured more rum, a cheap price to pay for the forthcoming knowledge that *L'Espoir* would winter at Puerto Cabello, where she had to go to obtain money for the annual pay of the garrisons of Martinique and Guadaloupe. The Spaniards, after centuries of losing men and ships to the English, wisely preferred to let gold fight for them instead of steel and blood, and would be willing to give du Bois all that he required.

"There, *mon capitaine*," soddenly mumbled a Frenchman, "there you will find him. May his soul fry in hell!"

Gosselyn quieted the sudden rage of his guests, as they began to rail against du Bois, who had abandoned them in a fruitless adventure of wretchedness and death. He well understod how they felt toward the gentleman, and could easily have added his own voice to the tirade, but preferred to soothe their spirits until the liquor overpowered them.

When his guests were snoring peacefully, Gosselyn went topside for a breath of fresh air, a cigar, and some thought. He had about four months in which to investigate matters at Puerto Cabello, which gave him ample time to find out everything he could about the Spanish town tucked at the rim of foothills on the northern coast of South America. He savored the visit to the Spanish Main, and dreamed a while of meeting du Bois.

When Graham came aboard from supervising the gaiety ashore, Gosselyn gave orders to sail at dawn.

Four days later, his hold jammed with morose men, he fell in with the *Sparrow*, and by the end of that week, dropped anchor in Basse Terre Roads. Only as he prepared to report to Sir Hyde did he bother to think about the disposition of his prisoners; the town had no facilities for imprisoning such a number. With a slight feeling of guilt that took away the vision of glory in his mind, he timidly went to call on Sir Hyde.

He could have dispensed with worry. The admiral was delighted with the entire affair, and warmly congratulated his youthful captain. The prisoners, he said, could be exchanged for unhappy British subjects held on Guadaloupe.

Eventually, Gosselyn received two letters which his descendants still cherish. The first was from the inhabitants of Aquita, with a bill of credit for a thousand pounds to be distributed

among his men. The second was a flattering letter of thanks from six hundred Englishmen, who had been freed by the exchange of his captives.

CHAPTER VI

PRIZE CREW

HAVING a definite idea of where *L'Espoir* could be found in December, Sir Hyde Parker restored the *Warwick* to routine duty, after assuring Gosselyn that he could, when the time was ripe, go after du Bois. Neither Gosselyn nor his crew accepted the orders graciously, having developed a keen personal interest in their quarry, but admirals are prone to overlook personal interests when there is much work to be done.

Merchantmen had to be convoyed clear of the Indies and the *Trent* and *Warwick* were rarely at anchor. Convoys had been made compulsory by Parliament in 1798, and while insurance rates may have dropped as a consequence, the lawmakers of Great Britain would not have been flattered by the wardroom conversations that resulted from the Act. Privateers were reluctant to attack escorted ships, since good business forbade running afoul of a well handled frigate. Captains preferred to cruise singly, unencumbered by any responsibility save that of upholding their country, and chafed at the yoke placed upon their movements.

As each convoy was taken out of the Indies and sent on the way to a meeting with the ships of the Bermuda squadron, the logbooks of the cruises could note only meetings with well-intentioned Americans desirous of placing themselves under protection for the once hazardous run. At the time, there was good will between the two countries, because the United States was at odds with France. English captains welcomed the advent of a Yankee sqaudron of brand-new warships in Basse Terre Roads, because it freed some of them from convoy routine, inasmuch as the Americans good-naturedly began to assume the burden of shepherding flocks of any nationality.

Obligingly, Sir Hyde Parker moved his base to Jamaica, leaving St. Kitts to the Americans. When, late in August, two more British frigates joined his flag, he had a respectable force with which to engage in some of those projects he had so long cherished. He was finally free to visit the Dead Man's Chest on the western side of Puerto Rico, where a handful of privateers had been steadily preying on ships making the Mona Passage. Promptly dumping the convoy responsibilities upon the newcomers, the admiral sailed with the *Trent* and *Warwick* on a cruise which for him was tantamount to a vacation.

The refinements of Kempenfelt's Signal Book had yet to sift down from the fleets to frigates on detached service, so Sir Hyde and his captains evolved an extremely simple three-signal system, which enabled them to spread the area of their search by sailing nearly hull down to each other, at a distance where the addition of a flag to the truck of a mast could not be observed. Merely by discharging blank cannon, they would know if they should close, keep station, or pursue. Gosselyn preferred this arrangement, since it almost gave him the freedom of a single operation, while the admiral was pleased because the pair of ships thus multiplied the area they could scour. Were there a sail higher than fifty feet within fifty miles, it would be visible to a masthead lookout. Cannonfire could then bring either frigate to the assistance of her mate should assistance be needed.

They trolled the cay flecked waters used by privateers on their way to and from the trade lanes north of Jamaica. The *Trent* was the first to find a purse. Gosselyn had memorized the simple signals, and knew upon hearing the faint rumble of a solitary report that Otway had flushed some quarry which he could handle, but desired that the *Warwick* keep her distance for communication purposes. Gosselyn watched as best he could.

Climbing to the mizzentop, where he could get a better view of the proceedings, Graham called down to his captain that the *Trent* was pursuing a schooner. Hearing more rumbling, Gosselyn tried to see if the *Trent* was firing. The distance was too great and the *Trent* was hull down. Graham promptly reported that the schooner had hove to.

Half an hour later, the frigates resumed their patrol, and a little two-masted schooner, fat with tobacco and white-faced Spaniards, sailed for Port Royal under new management. The officers of the *Warwick* were not too envious of their comrades on the flagship; the hunt was still young.

The next day, however, their altruism was heavily strained. The *Trent* took another schooner in addition to a sloop. This meant that her officers could spend their pay on other things than their mess. The *Warwick's* officers were not above accepting prize money easily won, if opportunity offered, and many small prizes could in time equal one large one. Unfortunately they had taken only prisoners and destroyed ships which, though it gave them their nation's gratitude, brought them not even a shilling, except in appreciation from those whom they had protected. Had they sunk commissioned war vessels instead, they would have had the consolation of prize money paid on the extent of her armament; as it was,

their victims had been privateers, valuable only if captured intact.

THAT evening, while Gosselyn sought to relax on the cooling quarterdeck, Graham dourly broached the subject annoying the mess. Absently, Gosselyn heard him through, little concerned with the luck of the *Trent*. His thoughts were far away in Sussex, busy with the fascinating study of a woman's mind. When his first lieutenant had finished and accepted a cigar, he asked, "If it isn't personal, how did you happen to know her?"

"Who?" Graham asked blankly.

"Who!" the captain repeated sarcastically.

"Oh," muttered Graham, understanding. "Phyllis. I thought we were talking about the *Trent*."

"*You* were," Gosselyn rejoined pointedly.

Perceiving that his captain was unconcerned with the flagship's good fortune, Graham shrugged off resentment. "Her family and mine are in the same parish," he said. "The same hunt, clubs and all that sort of thing. Actually, I never saw much of her at home and then I went to sea."

"Oh," said Gosselyn hollowly.

"Of course, I've seen her from time to time since then," Graham went on carelessly. "In fact, the family had some notion we should marry. Phyllis doesn't think so and neither do I."

"Why not?" Gosselyn asked rudely.

"Primarily because she doesn't think so," Graham answered wryly.

"I'm sorry," Gosselyn said. "She seems to have fastened on me."

Graham laughed softly. "You've used the correct word, sir. Don't think she'll let you wriggle loose, either. What Phyllis aims at, she hits."

Quietly, they smoked the cigars.

"Do y' suppose she's read the books she sent me?" Gosselyn asked curiously. "Demmed if I don't spend more time on Dr. Johnson's Dictionary that I do on the books."

"Certainly she has read them," Graham said. "She will expect you to, also."

"Now," chuckled Gosselyn, "think ye I have much time to worry about the *Trent*?"

"No, sir," said Graham, in good spirits, as he thought of how Phyllis would react to a spurned suggestion. "Not a minute."

They then discussed the subject dearest to Gosselyn's heart—winter, Puerto Cabello, and *L'Espoir*. They had studied the charts, descriptions of the harbor and surrounding roadstead until they could have painted Puerto Cabello had they been artists. They knew its defenses, dangers, navigation. The only thing they did not know was whether or not a cruiser out of Barbados would run across her before them. This, with all their piety, they besought God to prevent. With such a prize before him, Gosselyn could look with equanimity upon the privateer hunt.

The following morning, the *Trent* fell in with still another schooner, which she gobbled up and added to her bag. Even the life-loving members of the *Warwick's* crew grumbled. They didn't see much future in letting the *Trent* monopolize the captures. Not content with the prospects offered by *L'Espoir*, even had they know the extent of their captain's hopes, they murmured sulkily about the *Trent's* luck. Perhaps the admiral was conscious of the remarks being made, though he could not have heard them. Whatever his reason, he had his ships exchange stations.

And so, that afternoon, while in the place of the *Warwick*, Otway flushed a braque, whose value almost equaled the total of all her previous captures put together.

The *Warwick's* fortune seemed to have run out at Aquita. Sailors, though not necessarily superstitious, are reasonably cautious about taking unwarranted chances, such as offending the god of winds by usurping his right to whistle. The men of the *Warwick* began to look into their souls for any act which might have converted them into the pariah of all human beings, a Jonah. Each found some little secret best left safe between himself and his Maker, and uneasy was the sleep of the entire crew.

As a conscientious captain, Gosselyn was forced to take an interest when morale was affected. After all, their destination was scarcely a day distant, and his crew had nothing to show for their cruise. Gosselyn was a rational man, knowing that the law of probability could justify the events, but he was enough of a seaman to begin casting anxiously about for possible disaster, accepting the *Trent's* prizes as a portent.

Graham was alarmed by the change. Full well he comprehended the unpredictible ways of fortune, and he feared any impairment of his captain's calm. The big man was thoroughly devoted to his slight leader, whom he respected for mental superiority and expert seamanship. He would hesitate to say more than, "The skipper is a good lad" to a messmate in whom rankled a resentment of some criticism, but in his own way, he would do his best to be a loyal, efficient subordinate and tactful friend. Consequently, he went to great lengths to revive Gosselyn's interest in du Bois, to divert him from the disappointments of the chase. Gosselyn perversely capitalized on this expression of friendship to wring his friend dry of conversation about Phyllis.

The following afternoon, when the hills of Puerto Rico stood verdantly above the horizon, the masthead lookout excitedly shouted, "Ahoy,

the deck! Sail Ho!" The wind was nearly still, and the frigates drifted lazily under wetted canvas. The masthead's voice carried clearly over the ship, and in a trice, the weather deck was crowded with gaping men.

Off on the port bow, nearly midway between the frigates, a sail stirred on the horizon. Gosselyn and Graham climbed to the main topgallant yard to scrutinize the apparition.

"She's real," Graham ejaculated happily.

"And we've no wind," Gosselyn reminded him.

"Devil take it!" Graham fumed. "All week we've had more than enough when we couldn't use it."

Gosselyn laughed. "Cheer up," he advised. "The wind's as bad for her, too." He estimated the distance. "Sixteen miles. At two knots, we cannot possibly overhaul her. We must do something."

"Do what?" murmured Graham dejectedly.

"Well, now," replied Gosselyn, "What did Captain Pamplin do that day off Sicily? Shift the battery to give us a better sailing trim; knock loose the wedges under the masts; slack stays for a better rake; rig stuns'ls. Get to it, man! Do y' want the *Trent* to beat us to her?"

GRAHAM almost slid down the shrouds, barely touching the ratlines. Boatswains piped all hands to quarters, where the first lieutenant assigned them their various tasks. Soon the *Warwick* began to make more way, until Gosselyn calculated they were moving at three knots. The *Trent* boomed a signal to make all possible speed, which was not graciously received aboard her companion.

Efforts to make better progress were not confined to the English. Ahead, the schooner showed signs of slacking her rig, which, being fore and aft, put her closer to the wind than her square-rigged pursuers. She moved away from the *Trent* and across the *Warwick's* bow, on a diagonal course which permitted the *Warwick* to gain on her by a scant knot. The schooner could well afford to let the *Warwick* gain on her, since she had the advantage of three points to the wind.

Nightfall found the *Warwick* still some two miles distant, with the chase on her starboard bow. The *Trent* was out of the hunt. With the dark, Gosselyn took in all but his fore and aft sails, reasoning that the schooner would continue to exploit her rig, thus putting her through the night well to windward and astern of the frigates, from which position she could readily escape. Hoping that his surmise was correct, he prayed that the wind would hold steady, and turned in.

Although a spasmodically freshening breeze threatened to nullify his calculations, dawn found the *Warwick* scarcely more than a mile to leeward of the schooner. Considerably encouraged by this success of his deduction, Gosselyn put his cutters and longboats into the water. With right good will, his seamen threw their muscles into the job of towing their ship to windward. By four bells of the forenoon watch, when all hands were normally concerned with their forthcoming dinner, the *Warwick* had drawn to within a quarter of a mile of the schooner, well within reach of her guns.

Shifting course to the north, Gosselyn abandoned his notions of musket-shot combat, and treated the schooner to a demonstration of British gunnery. Firing a ranging shot across her bows, Gunner Harrison confidently promised to blast her out of the water if the captain only gave the word. Harrison's companions made several mutinous remarks about such a treatment of their hard-earned prize and, mumbling, he kept his own counsel.

Gosselyn beckoned to Graham, who hadn't considered it necessary to be present on the gundeck for such small bait. "Use the best crews topside," the captain said. "Keep putting a shot at her forefoot until she gets the idea." He frowned. "Absolutely no broadsides now. We want something left of her."

"Aye, aye, sir," Graham replied happily. "We'll put a shot a minute in front of her until she pulls down her rag."

Cheerfully, the weatherdeck gunners fussed about their pieces. Each gun captain squinted hopefully along his barrel, gauging the slight roll of the ship for the exact angle of elevation, waiting for the first lieutenant to order him to fire. Rather than offend the pride of his men by omitting to select some, Graham started from the bow and walked aft, gun by gun.

Methodically, the shots fell in a steady stream ahead of the schooner's jib, showering her bow with water. One gun crew disgraced itself by putting a shot into her hull, and Graham marked her gunner down for a goodly spell of drill. Gosselyn was angry, yet said nothing. He could easily imagine what the metal had done to the schooner.

Off to port, the *Trent* under bare poles was being dragged by her boats. Captain Otway apparently was reluctant to miss the show. Gosselyn estimated that he had at least two hours to secure the Frenchman before Otway could contribute to the capture, and if the *Warwick* couldn't accomplish that in two hours, Otway was welcome to try his hand.

And then, because everything was running so smoothly, the *Warwick* ran aground. Gosselyn stumbled, caught his balance and cursed. "Vast hauling in the boats!" he trumpeted to Whitby in the bow. "Douse all sail. Quartermaster, sound the bottom."

The *Warwick's* stout masts shivered delicately. Had they been set all atanto, perhaps

they would have carried away. However, they held, and Gosselyn anxiously waited to learn if his hull was sound. They had struck on a sandy ridge instead of rocks, and the *Warwick's* strakes, intact, nestled down in a cold and slimy bed.

Assured of his vessel's safety and the continued blessings of Providence, Gosselyn's attention returned to the schooner. In the stress of the mishap, she caught the bit in her teeth and sought to get away. Rapidly, she pulled ahead.

"I'm going after her," Gosselyn said to Graham. "Damned if we'll give her up to Otway!"

Graham ventured to suggest that he could be more easily spared for the pursuit of the schooner. His captain would not hear of it. "Roll out a pair of bowchasers to protect us," he ordered. "I'll leave you a boat to carry out the stream anchor. Don't worry about that fellow."

So, the first lieutenant watched the captain buckle on sword and pistols, call the marines and a party of seamen into the cutters, and set off after the frantic shooner. Thatcher and Rainier where delighted to find themselves in the boats and waved a gay adieu to their disappointed messmates.

Gosselyn was enjoying himself. Instead of *L'Espoir*, here was something tangible for him to grapple with. The execution of a modest plan of attack afforded him a measure of relief from his preoccupation with du Bois. As such, it was holiday.

The *Warwick* could be quickly and easily floated, and he doubted if Sir Hyde would censure him for grounding. The charts showed deep water in the area, and he had been given no warning of sudden shoaling. So long as his ship was undamaged, the accident could be regarded as an incident of service. He was free of worry, except for the likelihood of being blasted by the schooner's little guns.

Although the men at the oars may have been unappreciative, he minimized their exposure to shot by swinging well to the east before arcing to port to come up astern of the schooner. Upon perceiving that the frigate's boats were after her, the schooner commenced a furious cannonade with small caliber weapons.

Dispersion and range, though, were against accuracy of the little pieces, and the tiny splashes made by six-pounder shot did not seem threatening. However, Gosselyn was aware that accuracy increased inversely to range, and every yard brought danger closer to reality. The situation justified the expenditure of extra effort by his oarsmen to create a margin of safety in a decreased length of time under fire, having small appetite for dying in a trifling skirmish.

ON THE *Warwick*, Graham took matters in hand, giving Harrison full discretion in silencing the schooner. The *Warwick's* eighteen pounders spat from her bows and plowed viciously into the light scantling of the schooner's bulwark. Somehow, by adroit use of his anchors, Graham warped the *Warwick* slowly about so that her broadside could bear on the schooner. This served a useful purpose, for the privateer's skipper promptly ceased firing, and hauled down his flag. He did not, however, heave to, which Gosselyn did not like, since privateers had been known to make a practice of greasing their halyard blocks to facilitate ready hoisting and striking of colors. There was only one way to make certain she had surrendered and that was to man her. In the meantime, the schooner drew further away from the menace of the *Warwick's* broadside, and could be expected to remain silent until she went beyond three thousand yards. Her skipper did not have to be overly intelligent to know that very few shots from a frigate's heavy broadside would be needed to sink him.

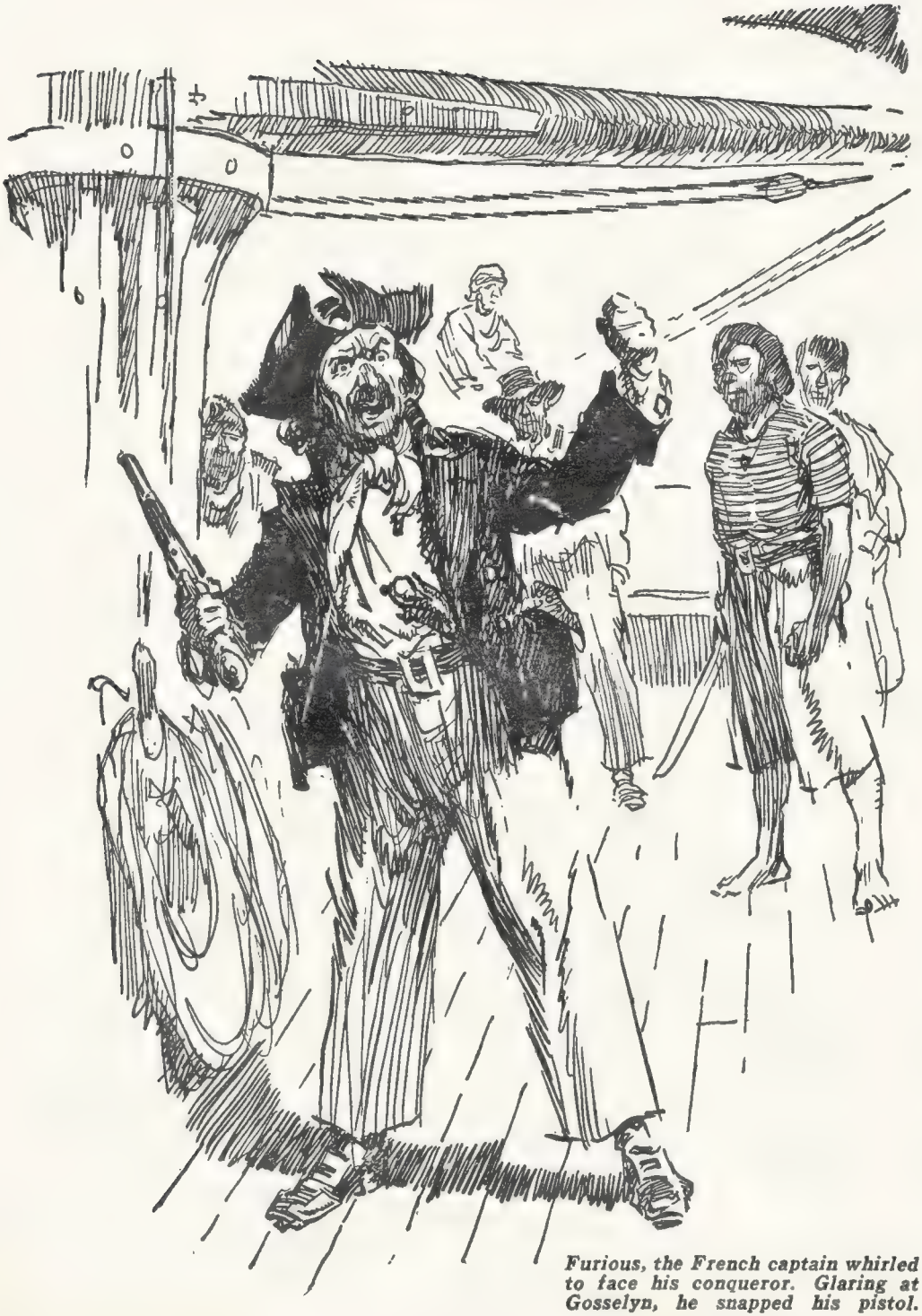
National pride or native stubbornness or vengeful cunning brought the tricolor up again when Gosselyn's boats were close enough to be in possible danger from wild shots, though the Frenchman kept away from his guns. Rightly or wrongly, he chose to repel boarders. In this, he failed to count on the marines.

Lieutenant Thatcher, as befitted a soldier, was an authority on small arms. In his opinion, the musket was a useless bit of equipment when contrasted with the rifle. Infantry tactics had laid basic reliance upon the bayonet, more because smooth-bore muskets were inaccurate than because of blood lust. Unfortunately, however, the doctrine of the bayonet kept the marines from participating in fights between ships, unless an actual boarding took place. Thatcher did not care to feel left out of combat and had prevailed upon Gosselyn to equip the marines with some captured American rifles which had been stowed in the Portsmouth Arsenal as curiosities after King George's War in the American Colonies.

As a result, therefore, Thatcher's boatload of sharpshooters cleared the schooner's rail at a hundred yards. Gosselyn's boat darted for her counter before the French recovered from the blast of rifleballs. It was a matter of seconds for Gosselyn to claw his way up to the deck. Panting, he hopped down from the rail and drew his pistols. A dozen riddled bodies lay at his feet, staining the dirty planking with their blood.

Forward of the main, the French captain screamed at his men to repulse the damned English. They, however, huddled silently in a watchful group.

Furious, the French captain whirled to face



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his conqueror. Glaring at Gosselyn, he snapped his pistol. As the ball hummed past harmlessly, Gosselyn ducked and checked an instinctive move to return the shot. The man stood alone among his fellows, and there was no need to kill him. Gosselyn was startled, then, to hear the bark of a pistol at his side. Slowly, the Frenchman choked, buckled and fell forward.

"Are you all right, sir?" Midshipman Ranier gasped.

"Yes," said Gosselyn softly. No purpose would be served by telling the lad he had needlessly killed a man, that Gosselyn could easily have done the same but had refrained from doing so. The youngster had seen his captain shot at, and had defended him. His motive was praiseworthy as well as heartwarming. Some captains never knew that loyalty and managed to die gloriously at the head of seamen who could have saved him had they wished. Gosselyn was content to let Mr. Ranier realize in the experience of later years that the Frenchman could have been mercifully spared; his mind and soul would be tougher then. "Thank you," Gosselyn added.

The midshipman was furiously reloading his huge pistol, but found time to smile.

When his seamen were behind him, Gosselyn accepted the capitulation of *La Hirondelle,* of ten six-pounders, and eight score men. From the few hits made by the *Warwick,* nearly a third of her crew had become casualties, and the remainder stood about unresistingly, dazed from battle shock, while the British disarmed them. Harrison had hit her barely a half dozen times, yet had the schooner been pressed over by a breeze, she would certainly have filled and capsized.

Her storerooms were stuffed with booty from her victims, including a supply of precious metals and jewelry that Thatcher thought would bring a cool ten thousand pounds when converted into sensible money. Less than a day had given them more prize money than they had seen in five years in the Mediterranean.

"We should do this more often," Thatcher observed, grinning.

"How many people once owned that, do y' imagine?" Gosselyn asked idly.

Thatcher stopped grinning, and grimly went on a search for the schooner's log, wherein was the story of her last cruise. Many people indeed had possessed that wealth, but the log told nothing of their fate. Thatcher made certain that the privateersmen were well secured.

Squaring away the litter on her decks, Gosselyn carefully put about and sailed toward his stranded ship. His carpenters could repair the shotholes on the schooner, and Whitby could take her to Jamaica. As he approached the *Warwick,* he prudently put leadsmen in the chains to take soundings. The schooner's shallow draft easily carried her across the shoal, as her former captain had well known, but could no longer say.

TRIUMPHANTLY boarding his ship, followed by the treasure, Gosselyn revitalized the perspiring Graham by spilling the stuff upon the almond-white deck, where the sun gleamed and sparkled upon the things men died for.

"Well, now," Graham exulted. "The trip was worth the trouble!"

"She's the *Hirondelle* out of Santo Domingo," Gosselyn said quietly. "Put the carpenters aboard her. You banged her about pretty badly. She will cruise with us until repaired, then Whitby can take her to Kingston."

"I thought we hit her once or twice," Graham remarked.

"You killed twenty-six men," said Gosselyn flatly, and indicated by his manner that they had spoken enough about their prize. "Anything develop?"

"Look at our flagship," Graham advised, having remembered too late that his captain was sensitive about freshly killed men.

Gosselyn obeyed, and his nerves taut from the strain of chasing *La Hirondelle,* enjoyed a delighted chuckle. The *Trent,* avid for a share of the schooner, had run afoul of the shoal, and was fast in the sand. Automatically, thereby, she lost the right to scoff at her companion's mishap.

"Let's get on with it," Gosselyn said to Graham. "Perhaps we can assist them."

Graham had carried out an anchor, and just a few minutes of kedging broke the frigate free. Once afloat, Gosselyn maneuvered over the kedge, took its cable to the capstan, and heaved it in to the cathead. Swinging it aboard, he went to see what could be done to help the *Trent,* whose sin in running aground was far greater than the *Warwick's,* since Otway should have taken full warning from Gosselyn's trouble.

Using the same method, she had almost broken loose, and Otway scorned assistance. The ships drifted close enough for Gosselyn to shout across to Otway that they had best haul off to leeward into charted waters before they further embarrassed the admiral by scraping their keels. Otway was amenable to the suggestion.

As the frigates fell off the wind and Whitby set sail for Jamaica, the seas began to rise and a fresh breeze sprang out of the east. The frigates didn't have immediate need of a breeze, so, womanlike, a breeze appeared. Plotting their position by the hills of Puerto Rico, the frigates performed a service for the admiralty by running a chain of soundings along the southern limit of the shoal, so that future captains would not pile up their vessels. With his quadrant and chronometer, Graham checked the terminal

point of the *Warwick's* soundings by his eight o'clock position, and found them good.

All hands on the *Warwick* turned in that evening with the satisfaction of having lived a noteworthy day, though Harrison grumbled about the avarice with which the crew discussed their new wealth.

The following morning, being near their objective, Dead Man's Chest, Sir Hyde Parker ordered the *Warwick* to take station two cable-lengths astern of the *Trent*. The need for covering a large area had passed. There would certainly be privateers in this hitherto unassaulted haven, but the frigates could deal with them most flexibly in column.

Feeding his crew Sunday fare, Gosselyn issued them a double ration of grog, so that the men would be moderately anesthetized to the impending battle. If rum made them fight the better, rum they would have. It was cheap enough, especially at Jamaica. The unaccustomed luxury worried the more sober men. It wasn't the King's birthday, and fancy rations reflected a guilty desire on the part of a captain to be pleasant to men who would soon be beyond pleasantries. This reasoning was not far from wrong. Gosselyn knew that sunset should find him with some bodies to sew into canvas.

None of the English frigate captains had made a recent estimate of the strength of Dead Man's Chest. However, land-based guns always have an advantage over ship batteries, and if well managed, the advantage could be counted as high as four-to-one. Graham, for example, with twenty guns ashore, would be more than a match for a seventy-four. Gosselyn could only hope that none of the enemy allies had a gunnery officer like his. Not being sure, he was kindly disposed toward his crew.

He delayed clearing for action. The less time his men waited at their guns, the more appetite for fighting they would have. Not until the spit of land locking Dead Man's Chest from the north and west hove into view did he beat to quarters. Naked to the waist, to minimize the dangers of infection from wounds through unclean clothes, the crew fried topside and broiled below. In his shirtsleeves, head covered by a broad-brimmed straw hat, Gosselyn expectantly mounted the bulwark by the mizzen chains.

Dead Man's Chest was a secure anchorage for small craft. A bay half a mile deep, it belled inland from seaward. Bounded by hills that shunted off the high winds of gales and hurricanes, its entrance was locked by a sand spit a few feet high on which Gosselyn could see a redoubt that had to be dealt with. Slowly, painstakingly, he surveyed the hills. The Spaniards had no compunctions about displaying their power. Frigates could not cross the bar extension of the sand spit, and there was no point in masking fortifications to take visitors by surprise.

Undaunted by scattered shots from the beach, the *Trent* sailed past the Chest. The *Warwick* dutifully followed her, though Gosselyn was irked by the admiral's delaying caution. When they returned, the shore guns would be fully manned, whereas there was a possibility that some might have been demolished before they could be served, and the overall problem thus simplified. He discovered, however, that the admiral did not intend haphazardly to pulverize the privateer base. The *Trent* hove to, well clear of the Chest, and signaled for Gosselyn to come aboard with his first lieutenant.

IN THE admiral's cabin, Gosselyn learned that Sir Hyde was determined upon complete annihilation. On a chart of the Chest, he had sketched in the location of the observed batteries and ships. Sanguinely designating specific targets for each frigate to take under fire, Sir Hyde expressed the hope that the gunners would teach the Spaniards a sound lesson. He brushed aside any suggestion that smacked of falling short of his object.

Gosselyn returned to his ship wondering if his magazines held sufficient ammunition.

The frigates got under way, and stood back toward the Chest, as Gosselyn reviewed the admiral's orders with his animated first lieutenant. Graham took a sporting view of the project, and was nervous to make preparations for what he called a good shoot. The members of the crew soon caught his enthusiasm, and the shot furnaces glowed brightly while anxious gunners peered into them for the first signs of color in their polished shot.

Of course, the Spaniards had range markers staked about their entrance. As the frigates progressively came into line with their sights, the batteries flowered with smoke, and Gosselyn began to believe he would never again be able to pass food down his contracting gullet.

The *Trent* concentrated on the sand spit redoubt. Her broadside thundered and rippled the water. Clouds of sand sprayed upwards and fell into the slight surf. When the air cleared, huge gaps had appeared in the trim line of the redoubt, with here and there a caved-in embrasure. Of the battery's guns, only half replied in the two minutes the *Trent* took to worm, sponge and reload. The frigate shuddered again from the concussion of her broadside, rolling a strake under the green water. The redoubt was showered with sand and pebbles.

Then the *Warwick* was on the range, able to return the interest shown in her, and Gosselyn was diverted from witnessing the progress of Otway's duel.

As the *Warwick* floated within their sighting battens, two batteries flared simultaneously on the southern heights. They were perhaps three

hundred feet high. While heavy metal fell about the *Warwick* and slashed through her sailing gear, Graham coolly walked one shot after the other up the hill until the last struck fairly into a battery. Thereupon, Gosselyn let go an anchor, doused sail, and waited for an end to the day.

The sun's declination placed it almost overhead, and soon the seamen were sweating out their grog. Powdermonkeys were busy with trips to the scuttlebutts, drawing buckets of water for both guns and gunners. Shot racks emptied quickly and were as quickly refilled. There was no confusion. Graham found one target, worked over it until resistance therein ended, and shifted to the next on his list. His guns fired as they were reloaded, without regard for the niceties of broadside discipline, so that a continual rain of shot irresistibly crushed the Spaniards.

Slowly, the land batteries were knocked out by superior gunnery and operation. Within the Chest, eight privateers and the town awaited judgment. Gosselyn would have preferred point blank range, but it took very few red hot shot to ignite the wooden ships. The *Trent* finished off her batteries, and commenced lobbing hot shot at the town, which had so long been a roisterous market for pirated goods and bawdy revelry at English expense. The few ancient buildings soon crumbled amidst flaming roofs and floors to provide a fitting backdrop for the blazing privateers.

When, during the first dog watch, Sir Hyde Parker flew the signal to break off action, he could rest assured the citizens of Dead Man's Chest would never forget that Great Britain had a mighty arm in her Royal Navy. Not a gun remained emplaced, not a privateer was afloat, not a building had a roof. No one moved on the beach. Survey with telescopes disclosed only madly running dogs. Everywhere was death and desolation. Men who had slaughtered helpless merchant sailors began to decompose under the sun.

Sir Hyde thriftily sent a party of marines and seamen ashore to gather up shot which had been stopped by the sand and rifle gunpowder from the obliterated fortifications, so that the frigates could partially replenish their magazines. The marines found no one to meet their approach, though here and there a figure broke from hiding to flee desperately away from them. The cannonading had been most thorough, though Thatcher, as senior officer present, cautiously refused to venture near the town, where wrathful Spaniards would have the protection of charred masonry from which to shoot at his men.

He did not permit looting of the dead, so his party returned to their ships with nothing to show for the day save loads of ammunition. He silenced criticism with the reminder that the Spaniards would like nothing better than to get their hands on an Englishman who had been in the frigates.

The *Trent* had nine killed, and more than thirty wounded. That sunset, Gosselyn committed the bodies of seven men to the sea, and ordered Surgeon Rogers to be most careful with the score of men in his charge, most of whom he was to lose as well. He then went to his cabin, lacking the heart for violent slaughter, and the placidity of mind to behold men shattered and broken without emotion.

Satisfied with the havoc visited upon the Chest, Sir Hyde boldly circumnavigated Cuba, scaring the Spanish Governor of Havana, though he had insufficient force to attack the mighty bastions of Morro Castle. The pair of frigates made a reputation on the coast, as they fell in with unwarned privateers and merchantmen. Word of their presence soon traveled to all harbors and the privateers stayed in port. The American squadron developed the habit of gathering a convoy at Havana; out of deference to the fright evoked in neutral merchantmen, and because of a sharp decline in the number of privateers at sea, Sir Hyde went off to Hispianola, until, by late October, the frigates had been so weakened by the absence of prize crews, that he was obliged to end the profitable voyage and return to his base at Jamaica.

Greatly pleased with the results of his vacation, Sir Hyde released the *Warwick* with his blessing to resume her hunt for *L'Espoir*. Giving Gosselyn a letter for the commander of the Windward Station, Sir Hyde bade his captain not to return without du Bois.

Grimly, Gosselyn made a promise, and laid a course for Barbados, to settle du Bois and to make his fortune.

CHAPTER VII

EXPERIMENT PERILOUS

ON THE voyage to Barbados, Gosselyn endlessly drilled his men. He had them exercise at the great guns until Graham guaranteed that they would be able to deliver broadsides in less than a minute and a half, which was at least twice as fast as the most able French crew he had ever heard of. Gosselyn was obsessed with the idea that the *Warwick* had to be at the very peak of fighting trim, and accepted his first lieutenant's plea for moderation in the length of drills only when the pestilential climate threatened to take a toll.

It was a tribute to Gosselyn that an officer had to intervene for the crew. The seamen themselves could not understand the need for so much attention to a trade they knew better than their own hearts. They were going to fight a ship, probably moored under the guns of a

town. Well, they thought, hadn't they fought other frigates? Hadn't they wiped out the pirate nest at Dead Man's Chest? They couldn't comprehend why Gosselyn was so excited about a Frenchman hiding in a Spanish town, but if their captain wanted them to work, they were willing to repay him for his kindness and thoughtfulness in other things.

Naturally they complained to their officers, though not seriously. If a sailor didn't complain, it was an indication he wasn't long for this world. They didn't expect any of the officers to carry the complaint to the skipper, because they felt Gosselyn wouldn't grind them in the damned sun if he didn't have a good reason for doing so—somehow connected with their own benefit.

In point of fact, however, they were admittedly relieved when the emphasis on gunnery was shifted to small arms. There was far more sport in swinging a cutlass than there was in tugging on the heavy line of guntackle, dragging a ton-and-a-half monster around. Lieutenant Thatcher had an opportunity to school them thoroughly in the rudiments of the parry, which again proved that Gosselyn was interested in the welfare of his men. It didn't serve a sailor to know only how to cut and thrust, inasmuch as his opponent sometimes made a lunge, too; it was well to know how to turn a blade aside. Knowledge that safety of life and limb rested in a few quick motions of the arm or wrist reassured many a man who recalled that the Dons were fond of the long, lean rapier.

Thatcher believed that a man in battle never thinks. Therefore, the marine lieutenant aimed to have the parries come almost instinctively to the seamen, without recourse to conscious memory. To this end, each seaman hacked lustily away at all the spare wood that Graham could spare, until each seaman was confident none of his shipmates could touch him.

This, for Gosselyn, was a distinct improvement, and the last day before sighting Barbados, he relaxed, content to let fate have her way.

As a captain assigned to the Leeward Station, he resented the amount of naval power displayed at Garden Anchorage. Five seventy-fours, eight frigates, and a score of ships and small craft swung at their cables. In addition Admiral Alan Lord Gardner must have had about a third as many cruising, which represented to Gosselyn a most respectable fleet. It was not great enough to fight a major engagement, but the admiral could employ those ships in an invasion of an island like Guadaloupe with reasonable prospects of success. Sir Hyde Parker had good cause to feel slighted at the force given his flag, even granting that the war was more active and on a bigger scale on the Windward Station.

Gosselyn reported aboard the flagship to pay his respects and present his letter to the admiral. He waited attentively while Lord Gardner perused the shaky handwriting of his colleague, prepared to answer any charges of presumption on the part of his superior. After all, *L'Espoir* was fair game for the Windward Station, and Lord Gardner had a right to send him packing, though du Bois had first appeared in the north.

The admiral put down the letter and stared at Gosselyn with hard blue eyes. "Do I correctly understand that you intend to take *L'Espoir* in accordance with your instructions?"

"Yes, sir," Gosselyn answered bravely. This was not the time to admit that he was greatly worried about the undertaking, and probably would have accepted an opportunity to abandon it if given an honorable path out.

The admiral rose, walked to a chart on the cabin bulkhead, thought a moment, and pointed to Puerto Cabello. "You are certain she is there?"

"No, your Lordship," Gosselyn admitted truthfully. "I think she may be."

"Come here, sir," said the admiral and, as Gosselyn obeyed, the admiral's finger swiftly moved about the chart. "Your ship *is* there," he remarked. "She was reported to me this very day. I intended to have her taken."

"Yes, your Lordship," Gosselyn said dejectedly. His quarry was to elude him merely because some fool clerk at Whitehall had decided to make a neat division of the West Indian Squadron. This was not an acceptable way out for him, because Lord Gardner could easily overlook the division.

THE admiral fixed Gosselyn with a steady look. "It would save me considerable effort were *L'Espoir* to be removed from action," he said gravely. "She has been landing irregulars all over the Station, and for that reason alone I must hunt her down. However, I contemplated using my ships-of-the-line. Puerto Cabello is a respectable place."

"One ship might easily succeed, sir," Gosselyn said quickly, cursing himself for sounding like a zealous would-be hero. Still, it was true. A large fleet attracts attention, and there were too many islands en route to the coast to hope to take the French by surprise.

"Tell me what you know of *L'Espoir*," Lord Gardner suggested.

Gosselyn told about the affair at Aquita, and confessed his disappointment at having failed to capture *L'Espoir* in his first encounter. Seeing that this interested the admiral, he went on to describe finding her at St. Thomas, and how, after he had challenged du Bois, the fellow had slipped away.

"I see," Lord Gardner commented, when Gosselyn had finished. "That is what Sir Hyde means by saying you have a prior claim on the scoundrel."

"Sir," Gosselyn said simply, "I very much desire to bring him to action."

Lord Gardner studied him. "Do you know that there are more than two hundred guns at Puerto Cabello?"

"When you speak in hundreds, your Lordship," Gosselyn said gallantly, "does the total matter?"

"Well spoken, Captain!" Lord Gardner replied. "Now, then, would you desire any assistance from my squadron?"

Gosselyn was alarmed. If he could bring her to action, he did not want *L'Espoir* to be shattered by a two-decker. She was his. Some day, if he lived, he would walk her decks, trim her sails, and take her back to Sir Hyde in triumph. One way or another, her beautiful hull wouldn't affect a big-ship captain who, surly in the might of his broadside, would make kindling wood of the finely joined timbers of a Frenchman.

"Sir," he said earnestly, "if it would not displease you, I prefer to undertake this duty alone."

"Very well, Captain. Draw what supplies you need. God be with you. Let me hear from you upon your return."

And so Gosselyn received permission to cut out a thirty-eight from under the muzzles of two hundred cannon designed to repel a fleet. Doubting his good sense, he went back to the *Warwick*.

Laying his course around the southern end of Granada, and thence westerly past Los Hermones, Orchilla, and the Grande Cay of Los Roques, Gosselyn sailed to Longitude 68 West, and headed due south for his goal in the Golfo Triste. The *Warwick* made the six hundred-mile passage in an easy four days. When the mountains of Venezuela loomed on the horizon, he corrected his position by quadrant angles on the peaks and found that Graham had done a good job of navigating. They had traveled in blue water fortunately without sighting a sail. Their arrival at Puerto Cabello would be a complete surprise.

Heaving to, Gosselyn mustered his crew at quarters. Crowding his four hundred men forward of the mizzen, he told them of their mission and his expectations. He felt they had a right to know. He tried to appear calm but ill concealed his trepidation. He managed to impress upon his men that he was leading them on an exploit which, if it ended disastrously, would be labeled foolhardy, but which, if carried off, would enshrine them among the heroes of the Royal Navy.

The crew listened patiently. Their captain must have forgotten, they thought, that he had a servant who was a member of the crew, and not above passing on a bit of scuttlebutt. The men were well aware of their destination. When Gosselyn had finished, they embarrassed him by responding spontaneously with three cheers. Gosselyn retreated hastily to his quarterdeck so as to avoid any show of emotion. With such men, he was ashamed of his base purpose in seeking *L'Espoir*. No fortune was worth a misuse of the trust they displayed in him. He was sorry he had brought them to this action, and would forever feel humble for whatever reward was given him if successful.

It was almost suicidal to approach Puerto Cabello in daylight, but Gosselyn had to know where *L'Espoir* was located. Hoisting Dutch colors, he endeavoured to make the *Warwick* look as much as possible like a broadbeamed man-of-war built for the shallows of Holland. He ordered the yards trimmed to the wind, and made for the western shore of the city. This would give him the best look at the harbor, while he feigned the part of a Dutchman making for Aruba or Curacao.

As the buildings and castle of Puerto Cabello hove into view, the masts of ships in the fingered inner harbor were overhung by the hills mounting the two hundred cannon. Graham perched in the maintop to catch the first glimpse of the French frigate, and it was a welcome moment when he shouted down that he had sighted her lying offshore in the roadstead.

Giving his first lieutenant five minutes to study the situation, Gosselyn shifted to the opposite tack, and beat away from Puerto Cabello. He had no reason to come closely under the scrutiny of *L'Espoir's* officers, who were doubtless familiar with the *Warwick's* lines. He was considerably worried when he espied a puff of smoke on the nearest hill, which was within a mile, but no shot smacked into the water, and he realized that he was merely being summoned to salute the flag of Spain.

This presented him with a problem since the salute, originally intended to empty the guns of a broadside as a mark of good faith, had descended into a firing of blank cannon. Loaded guns were not considered proper, and it was customary to sail with empty weapons unless action was imminent. The *Warwick* had loaded guns.

"Draw the charges in the carronades!" he shouted. "Double quick!"

Compelled by the frantic note in his voice, the quarterdeck gunners obeyed. The minutes seemed hours to Gosselyn before his first gun was ready to fire. The indolent garrison ashore fortunately did not care to disturb their siesta to man their stations under a hot sun, and gave Gosselyn ample time to get off a ragged salute. The battery, in turn, repaid the courtesy to the Dutch flag.

Sweating, Gosselyn awaited Graham on the quarterdeck.

"Well?" he demanded somewhat testily.

"She's moored bow and stern between a brace of low lying forts," Graham reported. "Apparently the Spanish don't trust friend du Bois."

"How close to the harbor is she?"

Graham held out a chart. "She's scarcely protected from the sea by this spur of land. It should be an easy task to cut her out."

"Let's hope so," Gosselyn said nervously.

STANDING to sea, the *Warwick* awaited sunset. Hove to, Gosselyn stood by for the shine of the city's lights to pale the star-studded night. His crew slept at their guns. For many or all, it could well be their last sleep on earth. Gosselyn could not rest. He remained on deck, feverishly playing his glass about the horizon, searching for any approaching vessel which might deem it suspicious that a large ship was tossing idly on the swells of the sea off an important if not vital outpost of Spanish power. Only small and disinterested coasting craft appeared to the southward.

And so, the moment arrived when the *Warwick* could come to grips with her foe. She was as ready as she would ever be for the engagement, and Gosselyn hoped she would have the advantage of surprise. If, as Graham suspected, the Spaniards were politely hostile to their ally, then the watch on *L'Espoir* would of a certainty concentrate vigilance upon their surroundings rather than on strange ships at sea. Yet, Graham could also be wrong.

Gosselyn would soon know. He did not, however, care what *L'Espoir* did. He had long envisioned all contingencies of this meeting with his quarry, and had carefully thought out his reaction in each instance. The situation possessed, therefore, few elements to confound him. He knew clearly what had to be done. Reason, in moments of peace, had been his servant. Not even Graham was fully in his confidence, for Graham would have objected to the plan that Gosselyn intended to put into operation. With the Frenchman at hand, there would be slight opportunity for protracted argument. Graham, perforce, would have to yield.

He was amazed to discover the steadiness of his pulse. His fears were those of the unknown. His enemy at hand, material factors patent, his forethought steadied his nerves with the reassurance that few things could occur to dismay him. He was prepared for any mishaps.

His resolution spread through the crew, as they whispered from the quarterdeck guns to the powdermonkeys to tell the main battery that the Old Man was now riding the horse.

The moon was quartering and scarcely lit the surface of the sea. More light came from the sparkling, white wake of the driving frigate. Gosselyn had hoped for a night such as this, dark enough to hide in at two miles, with sufficient visibility to make out objects within that limit, and the stars to steer by.

His night glass showed him the spur of land guarding the harbor from hurricanes. Around its point, *L'Espoir* was nestling. A mile away, he snapped his glass shut.

"Furl sail, Mr. Graham. Get the boats in the water. Mr. Thatcher, Mr. Whitby, Mr. Forsythe will be the officers. I want the marines and sixty seamen."

"Aye, aye, sir," Graham replied and hurried off to execute the command. He soon reappeared fully armed, and stood expectantly by the black cutter.

As the boats were hoisted out and lowered to the bulwark, marines and seamen scrambled into them. Gosselyn beckoned to Graham. "If we should get into trouble," he said, "make no attempt to rescue us. Fire on Punta Brava for the sake of the flag, and then set sail for Barbados. Understand?"

"You're going, sir!" Graham exploded.

"I will take the black cutter."

"Let me go, sir," Graham pleaded.

Gosselyn shook his head. "This is my show. I'm responsible. Don't give me trouble."

"It's my place, sir," Graham said stubbornly. "I've let you go before, but not now."

"No. I decided this a long time ago."

"Very well, sir," Graham murmured dejectedly.

Gosselyn held out his hand. "Those guns of yours may prove useful, you know." He looked to the boats; they were ready. He cleared his throat. "If it shouldn't come off, try to see Phyllis, will you? I'd like her to know I think she's right about a fortune."

Reluctantly, Graham took his captain's hand, pressed it for a moment, and let go. "Damned if I like it, Goss. You're a knave. I hope, though, I don't have to see her. Good hunting."

"Thank'ee," Gosselyn replied, and jauntily went to his waiting officers. He was far more carefree than his second in command, upon whom fell the strain of waiting. It took him barely a minute to give the trio their orders, and another to make certain the orders were understood. He then dismissed them to their boats, and stepped into the cutter's stern sheets.

WHEN all four boats trailed to sea painters, they cast off and rowed ahead of the drifting *Warwick*. Forming them in line behind him, Gosselyn had his stroke set a steady pace which would not exhaust the oarsmen. He gave them frequent rests. They would have to fight at the end of their trip, and it was sensible to keep them strong.

It was during a rest that Gosselyn saw the *guarda costa*. A small sloop, she bore down upon the boats. Gosselyn had envisioned such an interruption and was prepared. "We will let her come alongside us, and then take her," he said quietly. "All hands not at a sweep get below the gunwales."

Across the water came the faint cry of "*Alto!*"

Gosselyn's Spanish vocabulary was limited, but he had studied for this moment. *"Porqué?"* he shouted in reply. It was the impudence to be expected of an independent colonial, and the *guarda costa,* answering in her own tongue, behaved as Gosselyn had anticipated.

The officer on watch declined to brave the wrath of an awakened captain and crew, preferring instead to let them sleep, while he went through the routine of investigating a few unlighted boats, whose crews, like all honest working men, thriftily ignored the laws of Spain and saved precious fuel. The attitude was illegal, but if the *guarda costa* were to arrest all unlighted boats, there would be few left on the Venezuelan littoral.

The officer on the sloop held up a lanthorn as his vessel came alongside the black cutter, thus facilitating Gosselyn's leap at her rail. He had the point of his hanger at the fellow's throat before the Spaniard could scream an alarm. Silently, he persuaded the astounded *teniente* to keep the light high, while the cutter disgorged twenty efficient fighting men who swarmed over the sloop in a trice, disarmed the dazed watch, and battened down the hatches over the forecastle.

Binding the captives securely, Gosselyn demonstrated the flexibility of his plans by utilizing the sloop. Taking his boats in tow, he boldly stood for Punta Brava, silhouetted against the city light. Sentries would see the sloop and not challenge her, even though they might be overwhelmed by the energy of her captain when they perceived the four boats astern of her. Such a number would indicate that the crew was after the income from fines.

With brazen aplomb, Gosselyn sailed past the powerful fortifications on Tortuga Point. On its ramparts, sentries paused in their conversations long enough to cast an indifferent eye upon the *guarda costa,* and then, dismissing her with a derisive comment or two, returned to the subject at hand.

Gosselyn saw the bulk of *L'Espoir* quite plainly. Her anchor lights outlined for him the figures of the bow and stern watch. More than twenty men were visible, though the number was not unusual if du Bois expected trouble from the Spanish. *L'Espoir* was snug under the batteries, too snug, perhaps, for du Bois' taste. Little did the Frenchman dream that a Briton was resolved to extricate him from his predicament.

Gosselyn approached to within a cable's-length of the frigate before clambering into his cutter. Abandoning the sloop to the current, he cast off his boats. At his command a boatswain piped a shrill blast to order each officer to drive for his assigned objective. The pipe aroused the watch on *L'Espoir.*

"Qui vive!" came a sharp challenge from her quarterdeck.

Gosselyn let the flashing blades of his sweeps reply. With Thatcher close alongside, he darted for the frigate's counter. Whitby and Forsythe went for her bows. A patter of musketry dotted the frigate's bulwark. In Gosselyn's boat, a man shrieked and died. Before the Frenchmen could reload, the boats had won their stations.

A boatswain laid the frigate's stern cable over the cutter's breast hook and parted it with one blow from a hand axe. Hastily throwing a few knots up the cable as it hung down from the stern, the boatswain bent his weight into holding it taut as Gosselyn put all his strength into hoisting himself aboard. Below him, the rifles of the marine's crashed every time a head appeared on deck. Gosselyn entered *L'Espoir* through a cabin window, leaving fifty marines and seamen to the job of taking over the quarterdeck.

At the end of his journey, he paused to collect his wits. Accustoming his eyes to the darkness, he soon made out the objects in the cabin. They were regal in contrast to his Spartan furnishings. Walking over to a luxurious bed, he paused to make certain of his pulse. On the planks of the overhead, he heard the heavy feet of his seamen, the clumping of booted marines, the clang of steel.

Naked on the bed, du Bois stirred in his sleep.

"Wake up!" Gosselyn commanded brusquely.

As the accents of an English voice forced themselves into his consciousness, du Bois rolled over, and propped himself up on an elbow. *"Ma foi!"* he exclaimed. *"Quel—"*

"It is Captain Gosselyn, of His Majesty's Ship *Warwick,"* the slight Englishman interrupted. "I've come to learn why you disappointed me off St. Thomas."

Stealthily, du Bois stretched a hand beneath a pillow, saying, "A thousand pardons, *mon capitaine.* I had orders. Believe me, I much regretted not meeting you."

"I have a pistol in my hand," Gosselyn said calmly. "Suppose you refrain from compelling me to use it?"

Du Bois desisted from reaching under his pillow, and sat upright. "I am scarcely in condition to die," he said. "You will permit me to dress?"

"Certainly," Gosselyn generously replied. "I do not wish to make you ridiculous before your crew."

"Merci," murmured du Bois, and swung out of bed. Standing up, he stretched languorously. "This is a cursed climate, is it not? I shall be delighted to leave." Drawing on his breeches, he bent in a gesture to put on his shoes. Too late, Gosselyn heard the rasp of steel. When du Bois straightened, he held a rapier in his hand, point down. "Now shoot, damn you!" du Bois said fiercely. "At least I shall die sword in hand."

CHAPTER VIII

TO THE VICTOR

GOSSELYN stared at him. This, he had not foreseen. Du Bois should have surrendered peacefully upon being taken at a disadvantage.

"Shoot, you English dog!" du Bois cried bitterly.

The pit of Gosselyn's stomach hardened. His fingers trembled. He had only to squeeze the trigger; steel would strike a spark from flint, powder would explode and a lead pellet would be driven into the Frenchman. It was as simple as that. Du Bois would involuntarily clutch his wound, totter and then fall as strength drained out of him. That was why pistols were superior to swords; they killed with minimum effort.

Carefully Gosselyn backed away from his adversary, groping for a lanthorn.

Du Bois did not give him a chance to find a light. Observing the Englishman's reluctance to shoot, he suddenly plunged across the cabin. Gosselyn dropped the pistol. In the flash of its explosion on the deck, he saw the hate-maddened face of the French captain, and leaped aside as the rapier point drove for his torso. Before du Bois recovered, Gosselyn had his hanger in hand.

"It is best this way," he said mildly. If he lost, then he would have paid the price for his selfish ambition; if he won, he would have avenged the desolated families of Aquita. "This will settle our business, du Bois."

From shoreward, a few cannon boomed.

The Frenchman laughed and lowered his blade. "Now you will know why I was not a coward to refuse your challenge at St. Thomas, *mon capitaine*. You are at my mercy. That sturdy steel of yours is no match for my rapier."

"Let us see," Gosselyn said manfully.

Du Bois laughed. "A moment's truce, I beg of you. Do not draw your other pistol whilst I lay down my sword."

"Agreed," Gosselyn said, curious to see what du Bois intended.

Quickly, du Bois lit an overhead lanthorn. The bright light at first made Gosselyn squint. Expectantly, he stood poised to repel another lunge when du Bois retrieved his weapon. Smiling grimly, du Bois reached up on a bulkhead and pulled down a duplicate of his rapier. "Here, *mon ami*," he said, flinging it on the table. "I trust you know how to use this."

Stolidly, Gosselyn refused the weapon. Overhead, shots and screams told him the *Warwick's* men were fighting. He looked out of the window he had entered. The lights of the city were moving. Whitby had succeeded in his mission, so despite the outcome of the affair in the cabin, *L'Espoir* could still be Graham's.

Du Bois watched him. "So you have cut my cables," he said, and shrugged. "*Bien*. We had best get on. I shall have work to do when we are done here."

In the same circumstances, Gosselyn knew that the practical Pamplin would very likely have pulled the other pistol from his belt and shot the insolent fellow down. Rapier swordmanship was a Continental art, and it was a rare Englishman who could acquire real skill at it. Yet Gosselyn found he could only stand and await the onslaught of du Bois, though it meant his death. War is not a sporting proposition, and du Bois had no claim to quarter if he persisted in resisting, but Gosselyn, even with the image of Phyllis suddenly in his mind, could not draw his pistol.

Whipping his steel in salute, du Bois told him to take guard, and gracefully crouched in the deceptively awkward position of fence. Step by step, he paced toward Gosselyn, thin blade poised for lunge or riposte. As a noble's son, du Bois had learned the art together with his arithmetic. As an officer in the Marine of Louis XVI, he had doubtlessly employed his talents in earnest. Gosselyn knew no more than the rudiments of cut and thrust, but he knew them thoroughly. Gosselyn lifted the heavy hanger to the position of prime.

Slowly, du Bois revolved the rapier point in the movement of disengage. Then, with a supple speed, he straighted his arm and flicked over Gosselyn's guard to wound him lightly on the neck.

"That could have pierced your throat, *mon capitaine*," du Bois said, smiling, and settled back in position.

"It didn't, though," Gosselyn remarked, with a reflex of relief. The fellow seemed confident of victory, which Gosselyn resented. No fight is won until over. Warm blood flowed slowly down his neck onto his shoulders, back and chest. Cold rage flooded his heart. The hanger was a rough and ready weapon, well fitted to the needs of a man who cared only to beat down an opponent.

Gosselyn made up his mind. If left with the initiative, du Bois would end the combat with a dazzling lunge. Gosselyn could not permit that, having numerous reasons for wanting to live. The cabin wasn't sufficiently large for the refinements of fence, but his system of fighting required little more space than a coffin.

Swinging the hanger from side to side, covering his vitals with erratic movements of his blade, he advanced upon the Frenchman, who was intrigued by the vision of a deceased British captain.

"How now," he remarked, "are you coming to me, *mon capitaine?*" He stood his ground, eyes narrowed, and at the precise instant a lunge would carry his point cleanly through

Gosselyn's body, he threw his right arm and leg forward.

A mighty blast from the shore batteries shook *L'Espoir*.

Calmly, Gosselyn caught the rapier blade to the left of his own, and diverted the deadly steel to one side. Before he could turn his hand and hack at the Frenchman's head, du Bois sprang back.

"Well done, *mon capitaine*," du Bois grudgingly admitted.

"Thanks," Gosselyn replied wryly, and again advanced.

Du Bois waited until his opponent was at the extreme limit of his reach, and moved when he had every reason to believe he would catch the Englishman by surprise.

Gosselyn was ready. His heavy blade smashed irresistibly down upon the fine steel of the rapier. Following through with the lunge, du Bois was diverted by the blow from his plane of motion and his balance upset. His springy blade slashed through Gosselyn's thigh instead of lungs. Ignoring the pain, Gosselyn raised his arm and struck du Bois on the side of the head with the flat of the hanger. Promptly, without objection, du Bois crumpled, his hand relaxed upon the hilt of his sword.

THE struggle over, Gosselyn vomited from the shock of his wound. Staggering on his feet, he managed to draw the steel from his thigh. In being knocked off balance, du Bois had carried the sword with him, so that a neat puncture had opened into a long curving cut. Gosselyn ripped off his shirt and bound his leg. His senses screamed when he put his weight down on his right foot, and he could walk only at the expense of great will power.

Hog-tying the prostrate captain, Gosselyn painfully hobbled from the cabin. He pulled himself up the ladder, instinctively favoring his crippled leg. Putting his head through the hatch, he saw Thatcher running toward him.

"Thank God you're safe!" the marine said fervently. "The ship is just this minute won, and I was going to see what had become of you."

"The crew?" Gosselyn asked.

"Snug in their sacks—with my men keeping them there."

Gosselyn braced himself on the deck. Looking to the shore, he saw flame spurting from almost every fortification. The Spanish might not have known what had happened aboard *L'Espoir*, but they obviously resented her attempt to depart without proper clearance from their authorities. As yet the whole strength of the batteries had not been alerted. Gosselyn found he did not care. The guns on Punta Tortuga were less than two cable-lengths away. As the rampart flashed rosily, it seemed to him that every last shot must surely strike *L'Espoir*.

Either the Spaniards were still too sleepy for good gunnery or fortune does favor the brave. *L'Espoir* was hit and hit again, but most of the deluge of iron merely churned the waves about her. Below hatches, the imprisoned Frenchmen shrieked great oaths and died, when shot and splinters flew through the gun deck. Some opened gunports and plunged into the water. These, the riflemen in the chains permitted to escape. Those who tried to claw their way up the tumblehome to the bulwarks, the marines mercilessly shot. It was scarcely a time for civility.

The tempo of the engagement steadily mounted, as more and more guns blew flaming blossoms into the night. The shot fired at the frigate seemed almost equal to her tonnage. No matter where one looked, a geyser spurted or subsided. *L'Espoir* was drenched with spray. Her decks began to be a shambles of frayed rigging. Yards and topmasts crashed heavily onto the deck, or splashed into the sea, while sailors chopped away lines that held them to the vessel and hampered her way.

Gosselyn feared for his boats, and looked over the fantail. Those aft had disappeared in the boiling welter of water. Forward, when he finally reached the bow, only Whitby's cutter continued to drag the heavy frigate. Forsythe's boat and crew were gone. Gosselyn ordered Whitby to come aboard, and waited feverishly to see if his last boat would be destroyed before the order was completed. Whitby was the last to slip over *L'Espoir's* side.

"Well done," Gosselyn said. "Let's sail out of here."

In the reverberating crash of cannon all about them, Whitby did not understand.

Deciding that praise could be left to quieter moments, Gosselyn shouted, "Go aft and set the spanker. Steer northwest, if her rudder holds."

Whitby nodded vigorously and ran aft to the quarterdeck, apparently undaunted by his exhausting eternities in the boat, where every second might have brought destruction.

Summoning what seamen he could find nearby, Gosselyn had them hoist staysails, as aft, Whitby topped the spanker and set it close-hauled. *L'Espoir*, losing the momentum given her by the efforts of the boat crews, accelerated to a dawdling pace which by no means carried her as swiftly as Gosselyn would have liked, since he calculated that the battery on Punta Brava would have them under fire for at least five minutes. From the spanker gaff, Whitby hung the white ensign. Spanish eyes looking through telescopes could tell the difference between the flag of Great Britain and the tricolor of the French Republic. Spanish officers would do everything in their power to prevent the captured frigate from escaping them, thus mak-

ing a mockery of their powerful fortifications. Spanish gunners would be urged to do their utmost to blast her out of the water in the time she remained within range.

The fury of the cannonading doubled and trebled. To Gosselyn, the point of land and the hillsides seemed to be a bubbling froth of flame. *L'Espoir* trembled steadily with vibrations from striking shot. The roar overwhelmed the cries of wounded and dying men below. The stout sides of the frigate resisted punishment with complaining groans before yielding in cloudlets of splinters.

Whitby, with some of Thatcher's marines, had the French rig and work the pumps. Nationality dissolved in the urgency of remaining alive. The French did not need to be menaced by rifles and bayonets for, like all sailors, few could swim, and the frigate's boats were long since useless. Water flooded the hull at a rate greater than the pumps could possibly cope with. Gosselyn, stabs of pain storming his brain, labored with his seamen to haul sails under the ships bottom to bandage her wounds, while below, a group of Frenchmen frantically thrashed about in darkness and spurting water to pound wooden plugs into the shot holes.

Gosselyn went back to the quarterdeck to tend to the sailing of his battered prize.

Kept afloat by the concerted efforts of all hands and the prayers of their women, staysails and spanker shredding in the gust of metal, *L'Espoir* justified her shipwrights by holding to her course, steadily gaining precious yards

Swinging the hanger from side to side, Gosselyn advanced upon the Frenchman.

away from the hell of Puerto Cabello. The marines forgot about their prisoners, and ranged the weather deck, cutting torn tackle free, so that it would drift away from the frigate and not slow her by dragging. The seamen worked to salvage what rigging they could to set more fore and aft sail. By a miracle, the shot-scarred mizzen held under the spanker's pressure though the fore topmast staysail flapped uselessly when the stay parted.

Gosselyn's eye told him that the battery on Punta Brava was definitely receding to the east. He could see the more distant fortifications on the hills slacken their fire. To the north, he easily made out the *Warwick*, as she rode lazily on the current, sails furled, and marveled that the night glasses of the watch on Punta Brava hadn't sighted her.

His ear told him nothing, hearing long deadened by the ever-booming cannon on the too near shore. He became aware that the helmsman was shouting at him, though he heard no words, understanding the message only when a quartermaster put his back to the wheel and spun it about, and *L'Espoir* did not obey.

Gosselyn looked aloft. *L'Espoir* was falling off the wind. Her rudder control was gone.

Forgetting his leg, Gosselyn almost sprang at the after bulwark, where Whitby had already assembled a small group of seamen encumbered with blocks and tackle and a shattered skysail yard. Whitby, naked to the waist like his captain, was earnestly gesturing to his men, explaining by pantomime exactly what he intended them to do. Gosselyn's heart warmed to the young, broad-shouldered officer. All that gear could not have appeared at once. Whitby had sensibly prepared for the emergency.

Standing by, Gosselyn cursed his helplessness as Whitby climbed onto the bulwark rail, and tied a bowline in a line about his thick chest. Fitting the line snugly beneath his armpits, Whitby smiled cheerfully at his captain, and went down the counter.

ON THE shore, all batteries fell silent. The Spaniards chivalrously gave the daring English an opportunity to strike their detested flag. Her way lost, *L'Espoir* was helpless under the guns. The English had done enough for glory. The Spaniards would honor their audacity, as they honored their own brave men, few of whom could have sustained that cannonade so long. They were unaware, of course, that Gosselyn never thought of surrendering, once the frigate was his, and regarded the two hundred guns of Puerto Cabello merely as a challenge to his seamanship and courage.

He was far from heroic in his own opinion. He was as frightened as any of the Frenchmen desperately sweating at the pumps. What to the Spanish artillery officers was quixotic gallantry, was to Gosselyn the result of training. Captain Pamplin would have cut out *L'Espoir* with the same businesslike attitude, and so, too, would Captain Otway. Tradition formed their thinking to the extent where a studious observer could have predicted the reaction of a British naval officer to almost any situation. This does not imply that Gosselyn enjoyed himself. He regarded the cutting out of *L'Espoir* as a duty, and duty is rarely pleasurable.

The silence of the guns allowed him to look about his prize. She was far different from the proud craft he had met months before. At the moment, were it not for professional pride, he would scarcely have considered her worth salvaging. The flail of iron from so many cannon obviated the demands of good gunnery. A simple barrage was enough to shatter any vessel, and the Spanish crews, while irked by being isolated on a colonial station in a far off continent, were still the men whose grandfathers had terrorized Europe. The guns were far from the best, most having been taken from shipwrecks of the early conquistadores, with bores pitted and worn by centuries, so that balls rattled freely in barrels, wasting much of their propulsive force in freely escaping gases. But the crews laid them with a skill that had a telling effect in the salvos from Punta Brava. There, in the most seaward fortification, were the best guns. There were the best gunners.

It was this battery which had *L'Espoir* immobile beneath its muzzles.

Guarda costa sloops and launches swarmed out from the inner harbor. Thatcher interrupted Gosselyn's absorption in Whitby's progress to call attention to them.

"We haven't much time, sir."

Gosselyn cursed violently though at the same time he was immensely relieved. The Spaniards believed *L'Espoir* was in a hopeless state, ready to give in, and with any but a Sussex English captain aboard her, they would probably have been justified in thinking so. The *guarda costa* boats, however, would be a passport for *L'Espoir* to escape, if properly used.

"Break out canister for the carronades, Mr. Thatcher. Do not let the French stop you from opening the magazines."

Thatcher beckoned to his sergeant, and the order was executed. The beaten, demoralized French did not lift a finger against the band of husky marines who went down to the magazines and set up a human chain to pass the lightweight cans that fitted the guns and spread hundreds of musketballs at a single blast. When enough canister was on deck to satisfy Gosselyn, they passed powder bags, until the quarterdeck carronades could be served a full dozen rounds apiece.

With axes, seamen hacked at the stern bulwark, so that eight stubby cannon could be emplaced with muzzles depressed to their maximum and still keep themselves locked in their slides upon recoil. Double-shotting the guns, Gosselyn confidentially waited to discourage the Spaniards from boarding.

Leaning on the after bulwark, alongside of the seamen tending the lines supporting Whitby's party, he called to his second lieutenant. "How long, sir, before you're jury-rigged?"

Whitby, unhurriedly fashioning a huge, boatlike tiller out of his spar and tackle, swung out

on the end of his line and, dangling unconcernedly above the water, called back, "Give us five minutes, Captain, and you can take a strain."

"Very well," Gosselyn replied, and looked at the approaching Spaniards. Five minutes was a long time; they would be within reach of the carronades in two. He cast an eye over the bedeviled rigging. With luck, he could set the fore course, which, square to the wind, would get the frigate under way, though not under control. His charts failed to show soundings more than a mile west of Punta Brava, and to that line the waters gradually shoaled, so that he might run aground despite the chanting of leadsmen.

Immediately, he made his decision, and sent all available seamen to unfurl the sail. While they scuttled up the ratlines, he and Thatcher devoted their entire attention to the problem of the Spanish boats.

The marines, long accustomed to being spectators in battle, laid the carronades with the seasoned aplomb that befitted true men-at-arms. The leading *guarda costa*, a sloop, was doomed at a hundred yards.

L'ESPOIR slowly began to move. With soaring spirits, Gosselyn swore that he saw a slight wake beneath the counter, as the fore-course bellied whitely in the night. Over the water, a sharp Spanish voice cried out a summons to surrender.

Grimly, Gosselyn nodded at Thatcher. At once, the stern carronades thudded back in slides, blinding their crews with a flaming flash. The reports, multiplied as one, were shattering to the eardrums. At that distance, the weather deck of the sloop was winnowed by thousands of musket balls.

When Gosselyn could again see clearly, the sloop was alongside to port, harmless. Not a man could stand to her helm, and she was out of control with a dead crew.

"I say, Captain," Whitby called up plaintively, "let a chap know when you're playing with those things, will you?"

Gosselyn and Thatcher laughed. They could well imagine what it had been like under the counter.

"Sorry," Gosselyn shouted. "We'll fire at each one that comes to a hundred yards. Or would you rather have them help you down there?"

"Oh, keep 'em away," Whitby replied good-naturedly. "We're about done."

Taking warning from the fate of the leading sloop, the *guarda costa* began discharging their swivels and small arms. Gosselyn felt naked, hearing the enemy metal hum over the quarter-deck. A pair of seamen surged suddenly at the line they were holding. Quickly, they hauled up the comrade they had been supporting. He hung lifelessly in the bowline, a hole through his bare chest and back as big as his fist. Gently they pulled him over the bulwark and eased him to the deck.

Gosselyn swore softly. The seaman was not a pretty sight.

Another man was hit, and brought aboard, moaning, bare chest drenched with blood bubbling from two holes. Tenderly his comrades lowered him to the deck.

"Do what y' can for him," Gosselyn ordered tersely, and ripped a strip from the shirt bound about his own wound.

"Sir?" Thatcher said inquiringly, touching him on the arm to point out a launch which, swivel blazing, was within reach.

Gosselyn nodded, and the carronades executed everyone who stood in way of the canister. The launch sheered off. When the guns were reloaded, Gosselyn gave the order for rapid fire. Impelled by a superior charge of powder, his canister could fly a bit further than the *guarda costa's* lead, and would keep them at a respectful distance. His escapade had caused great carnage, far more than he relished, but he could not stand by and have his men made helpless targets. For the sake of a few, he endangered all, since the boats would withdraw, and leave *L'Espoir* to be finished off by Punta Brava. This, he regretted, as losing his insurance, but Whitby would have made the same choice, and he could not be less than Whitby.

A seaman tending the second lieutenant's line received a signal to haul away. Whitby came over the bulwark, threw off the line, and smiled triumphantly at Gosselyn, while a marine adroitly bandaged a hole in his right shoulder. Gosselyn held up a hand for Thatcher to cease fire.

"Sail away, Captain," Whitby said, and squatted down on the deck for a well-earned rest and treatment of his wound. His seamen cleared away from the counter, and stood about the quarterdeck boisterously congratulating each other on being alive, until Whitby waved them to the fairleads from the tackle.

"Steer northwest," Gosselyn said to the helmsmen in charge of the juryrig, and with much toil, the heavy rudder was heaved about to starboard to bite against the pressure of the wind on the fore and aft sails.

Almost instantly, the battery on Punta Tortuga opened fire, disregarding the danger to the Spanish boats. Scarcely had the flashes burned away, and the iron thrown into the air when, a mile off to sea, the *Warwick* stood out naked in the illumination of burning gases from her broadside. Graham had more than his share of sound nerves, but he was unable to stand by forever while *L'Espoir* was beaten to matchsticks. For many anxious minutes, he had waited with trained guns for *L'Espoir* to move

toward the north, and he had the range and bearing of the land batteries solidly in mind. One frigate against the fortifications was far from a fair fight, but the diversion afforded by the discovery of a new enemy could well mean *L'Espoir's* escape.

As Whitby's seamen pulled on the starboard tackle and forced the wrecked rudder to sink its teeth into the leverage of the sails, *L'Espoir* slowly swung her bowsprit in an arc to the right, and stayed there. Dousing the fore course, so the frigate could sail closer to the wind, Gosselyn permitted himself a moment's relief. A mile away was the sanctuary of the *Warwick*. They had only to run past the guns of Punta Brava to be free, and Punta Brava was primarily concerned with seeking the range of the warship which had fired.

Looking down at his tired officer, he said, "Mr. Whitby, think you we should help Mr. Graham with a ball or two lobbed at that battery?"

Grinning, Thatcher spoke up. "Captain, I took the liberty of shotting the long guns on the weatherdeck."

"Well, now," Gosselyn mused, "we cannot leave here without a salute to our hosts, can we?"

The hosts, with the frigate at the limit of range through their embrasures, unleashed a salvo. *L'Espoir's* speed was accelerating, and the guns, laid for her at a dead-slow speed, thrashed into her quarter and the water astern. Thatcher was felled by a chunk of the mizzenmast, as Whitby fired three round shot squarely into the battery. An insect bite, the defiance soothed the raw nerves of men aboard the leaking, battered frigate.

From the sea, the *Warwick* flung another broadside the effect of which Gosselyn could appreciate through his night glass.

The Spaniards had two more opportunities to blast *L'Espoir* out of the water, but her commander permitted himself to be seduced by the presence of the *Warwick*, and the guns were carelessly laid, fewer than a dozen shots in all hitting the doughty frigate before she crept out of range of the worn Spanish guns.

"We've carried it off," Whitby said jubilantly, as the Spanish shot, scattered, fell on the starboard side. Thereupon, he set about reviving the stunned marine officer.

Only when assured that *L'Espoir* was free of Punta Brava, did Gosselyn permit his wound to make its proper, long-standing demand that he collapse. Thus it was Whitby who brought *L'Espoir* alongside of the *Warwick* and grappled to her stout hull, so that the prize would not sink before all could be done to save her. Thus it was Graham who had the pleasure of persuading du Bois to reveal the location of the treasure chests intended for the garrisons of Martinique and Guadaloupe.

Thatcher was satisfied with the custody of du Bois, for that mercurial nobleman knew the tactics with which ragged volunteer armies were brushing aside the professional soldiery of Europe, and Thatcher was an avid student of his trade.

CHAPTER IX

HERO'S RETURN

GOSSELYN lay on his bed in physical dissolution. His thigh had swollen to huge proportions, but Dr. Rogers vowed he could save the leg without amputating. He had only a steady undercurrent of pain to remind him of his wound, unless he thoughtlessly moved, and then his whole nervous system seemed to be stabbed to death. He was content to lie and watch the harbor of Speightstown rise through an open gunport, as Graham brought the *Warwick* to anchorage.

He listened for the splash of her anchor, the commands to back and furl her sails, and the busy feet of the seamen setting the watch. Then, staring through the gunport, he watched *L'Espoir*, commanded by Whitby, glide to her anchorage alongside. He could see how much Whitby had been able to do by way of repairs. She still had only her foremast, a stump of the main, and part of the mizzen, but the holes in her shot-torn side were smoothly plugged, and would not open in a seaway. Sensibly, until she could be careened and properly mended. Whitby kept the sails under her bottom, but Gosselyn could not see any water being pumped over her side, and correctly deduced that Whitby had fairly well dried her out during the long tow to Barbados.

He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

A voice that had often awakened him roused him from a dream about Phyllis. Resentfully, he opened his eyes. Graham stood by the bed. "Captain," he said, "the admiral is here."

Gosselyn took advantage of his condition to make a few sour remarks about Alan Lord Gardner, but was respectful enough when the tall figure came through the door, followed by stewards laden with delicacies.

"I had to see you at once, sir," the admiral said, "to congratulate you upon your achievement."

Gosselyn murmured appropriate thanks, feeling very foolish to be abed when he should have been standing, while Lord Gardner remained unseated.

"I am taking the privilege of writing at once to the Admiralty," Lord Gardner said. "Though you were not assigned to my command, I feel entitled to commend you for an action fought upon my station."

For a shocking moment, Gosselyn thought

such delicacy of sentiment was ridiculous, then recalled that some day, he, too, would have a flag, and would not care to have junior officers think him a fool. "That is most kind of you, sir."

"Not at all," Lord Gardner demurred. "I shall be able to bask in your reflected glory. There's little enough with only privateers about, and no French fleet worthy of the name."

"Would you do me the favor, your Lordship, of writing a letter for me to Captain Pamplin? I would like him to know."

"Certainly," the admiral promised. "We were shipmates once."

They talked then about the disposition of the prize, and the admiral vowed he would see that every facility was afforded to make *L'Espoir* seaworthy for the voyage to Jamaica. After a few general remarks about the capture's probable stimulus to the war, the admiral withdrew.

Gosselyn promptly went back to sleep.

Fever caught him in a stranglehold, and the days passed in a nightmare while Dr. Rogers strove to save his leg. In his mind, fantasy mixed with reality, so that all seemed untrue and best forgotten, since remorse for the dead men of *L'Espoir* robbed him of any delights he had in dreams. In later years, he knew nothing of the events in the West Indies, beyond the visit of Admiral Gardner, though Graham told him often enough how *L'Espoir* had been refitted sailed to Jamaica and commissioned in the Royal Navy by Sir Hyde Parker. Since Sir Hyde commissioned her with Gosselyn as captain, giving the *Warwick* to Graham, Whitby had to fill in the rest of the story. Whitby, his wound healed, was made first lieutenant on the new addition to England's navy, and actually sailed her to Portsmouth.

Any lad in England could have filled in these gaps for him, did he but ask. Gosselyn and *L'Espoir* were taken to the nation's heart. Heroes like Blake and Nelson fought the great concentrations, and destroyed Great Britain's massed enemies on the seas. These men were honored solemnly, and made Lords, and given great veneration in history books. These were the line of battle heroes, and each generation would produce her own great leaders who would cunningly maneuver fleets to justify England's gamble in the largest navy on the seas. These men deserved their veneration and fame—but the frigate captains won love and glory. Hawkins and Pellew, these were the models for England's youth, who cherished the daring exploits of single ships fighting against odds. Sir Richard Greville of the *Revenge* would be admired long after the name of Monck had passed into the pedestals of statuary.

THE most recent immortal of the Royal Navy now fought a battle with a grimmer foe than the artillerymen of Puerto Cabello, as *L'Espoir* drove her stem toward a landfall on the high Cornwall coast. Perhaps the progression into more northerly latitudes, with winter raging in the sky, broke the fever; perhaps the sturdy life pulsing in his veins refused to be overcome by a pestilence; perhaps the prayers of a waiting maiden intervened with the course of Nature to set him free of rot. Whatever the cause, Gosselyn asked no questions, when, a scant week from the Lizard, the fever left him, and his thigh began to heal.

By the time the masthead gave the welcome cry that he had espied the bleak, gray coast of England, Gosselyn, well-clothed against the

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cold, could climb the ladder to stand upon the quarterdeck of his new ship. He could see for himself that she was come to a new home, contrary to the confident expectations of her government who had foolishly made for her a career of ravening upon the flesh of English life.

It was a short run to port. Gosselyn, face pinched with cold, relished the feel of a deck shifting beneath his feet, and the casual word or two of advice which Whitby needed to make a seamanlike entry into Portsmouth. With pride, he looked up at the gaff, where the white ensign whipped over the tricolor to tell all who cared to look that this vessel was a prize of war, wrested from the enemy.

A score of ships lay in the harbor, familiar shapes that Gosselyn had studied during the years of midshipman and lieutenant. There was the *Victory, Captain, Royal Oak, Barham,* ships which were well known to French and Spanish and Dutch admirals who had to know about them and their men. Gosselyn looked at them, the barricade which England had hewn from her forests to hold her land, and felt at peace with himself.

Upon signal from the *Queen Charlotte,* the senior ship present, each major man-of-war hauled up gunports, and fired the national salute for the trim French frigate daintily picking her way to an anchorage. The reports of more guns than those at Puerto Cabello rolled across the gray water of Portsmouth. Dispatches from the Indies had preceded *L'Espoir,* and the admiral had decided to render the honors accorded a conqueror of a fleet.

Gosselyn was overwhelmed. Tears in his eyes, he nodded to Whitby to return the salute to the flagship, and went below where he could give free vent to his emotions.

This was not all.

The Admiralty promptly confirmed the commissioning of *L'Espoir* and Gosselyn's command of her. Sir John Jervis, become Lord St. Vincent for his own great battle, personally undertook to have Gosselyn's share of prize money awarded promptly, inasmuch as a sum of over thirty thousand pounds could otherwise have been lost forever in the jungle of adjudication. City after city voted to give the *Warwick's* captain their freedom. The underwriters at Lloyds presented him with a sword valued at four hundred guineas, too magnificent to be used, but vastly suitable for hanging over a mantle.

After poring through their documents, the Royal College of Heralds decided there was room for a new peer in the realm, thus yielding to the demand of the politicians to please the public with proper recognition of their hero. At Buckingham, the King was graciously disposed to reward his servant with the battle title of Baron of Puerto Cabello, and a modest estate in Devon, where the Spanish Armada had been sighted. The rents from Egdell Manor would suffice to keep a baron in dignity and comfort, at the same time permitting him to cut a good figure in the House of Lords. Naturally, like most of England's holders of battle titles, Gosselyn would assert his right to a seat only during a coronation, but he could not say that his egotism suffered during his investiture when he was presented to his peers in the ancient House of Parliament.

At length, able to escape adulation and obtain leave, he set out for Sussex.

Despite his honors, Gosselyn experienced little triumph in reviewing his changed estate in life. Being honest, he could see no reason for him to be favored above his fellows, any one of whom could have taken *L'Espoir* had they been present instead of himself. He was just a little ashamed that a word from him to a Lord in the Admiralty had brought Captain Pamplin back to active duty, for it did not seem right in his conscience that he should be able to extend patronage to the kindest man he had ever known. He knew that none of his fellows begrudged him his glory, since the world was filled with England's enemies upon whom they could prove their spurs, but the eyes of his seamen were always in his mind whenever he thought of preening himself.

WHEN the walls of Gosselyn Manor rose in the distance, he felt depressed as, for the first time, he realized how unprepossessing the Manor was in contrast to its owner. Sir Edwin behaved as though he were the lord of a county, instead of a few acres. Gosselyn's eye was critical, as his coach rolled off the frozen ruts of the post road onto the ruts that led to the Manor. Much could be done to make the place shipshape. For want of energy, Gosselyn Manor was becoming derelict. The tenant cottages were little better, though most showed signs of work done by the husbandmen themselves.

His coach halted before the pillars of the portico. Gosselyn got out and limped up the stairs to the door. A strange servant admitted him to the hall. Seeing his brother huddled before the great fireplace, Gosselyn went to him.

Sir Edwin looked up. "Well," he said, "returned so soon?"

Gosselyn sat himself down to warm his bones at the fire. His thigh throbbed dully. "Yes, I have," he said, wondering with a sudden magnanimity how he could ever have permitted this pitiful, rotund figure to influence his happiness because of a few hundred pounds. Sir Edwin was a rotten branch in the minor aristocracy of England, and the tree would have withered and died, were it not renewed by new, vital branches in the form of younger sons compelled to find their own places in the world. Sir Edwin, in the time Gosselyn had been gone,

might well have done no more than have his chair moved from the table to the fireplace. He looked a little closer to his grave, a trifle more pompous, but just as spiritless and avaricious.

Even before civilities had been fully exchanged, Sir Edwin was endeavoring to find out if his younger brother had earned any substantial sum in the lucrative West Indies.

Amused rather than startled, Gosselyn confessed that he had taken his share of privateers, as he had written to Phyllis. It was refreshing not to be questioned about *L'Espoir*. He realized with a shock that Sir Edwin was so satisfied with his own world he failed to keep abreast of affairs; the London *Times*, which he had banished from the Manor as a needless expense, would have told him how Captain Gosselyn of the *Warwick* had fared in the West Indies. The village knew of it, and had cheered Gosselyn in his coach. Sir Edwin's character could best be judged by the fact that none of his neighbors had bothered to call and congratulate the baronet on the honor given his family, even though many would have enjoyed doing so only to point out that Farmery was now one cut higher in the nobility.

Bluntly, Gosselyn asked if Sir Edwin wanted money from him. He was gratified by a powerful sense of superiority and freedom from thrall. Never again would Sir Edwin affect him in any way.

Sir Edwin stirred in his chair. He saw a new man in his brother; one who could form his own opinions without diverting influences. He hoped that Farmery would have some pride of family, and told a dreadful tale of business reverses and the expenses of tenants, neglecting to mention his own careless management and extravagance. What with heavy taxes, the Manor was in a bad state.

Without interruption, Gosselyn heard his brother through. Then, after Sir Edwin had finished, he looked at the fire. He did not want to see the greed in Sir Edwin's face, when he asked, "How much do you need?"

Instantly, the baronet answered, "Five hundred pounds."

"The sum of my legacy," Gosselyn murmured bitterly, knowing without further inquiry that the price had been fixed when he entered the hall. He was angered by the sudden remembrance that Sir Edwin had not even troubled to ask about his health. His limp was obvious, and was difficult to overlook in the long walk from the door to the fireplace. However, Sir Edwin had been so concerned with the matter of the loan, Gosselyn was willing to believe his wound had been truly unobserved. Once, in his resentful youth, he would have relished an opportunity to make Sir Edwin dance for money; now, he contented himself only with reminding the baronet of his theft, and said quietly, "I will give you a thousand."

He delivered no sermon, just a simple statement, and was repaid amply by an astounded gasp.

"Where is Phyllis?" he asked.

Sir Edwin was staring disbelievingly at him. "A thousand pounds?" he quavered.

"Yes," Gosselyn assured him patiently. "My solicitor will accommodate you. Where is Phyllis?"

Reviving, Sir Edwin said, in the toneless voice of a man speaking while his mind is occupied elsewhere, "She is with milady in the west sitting room."

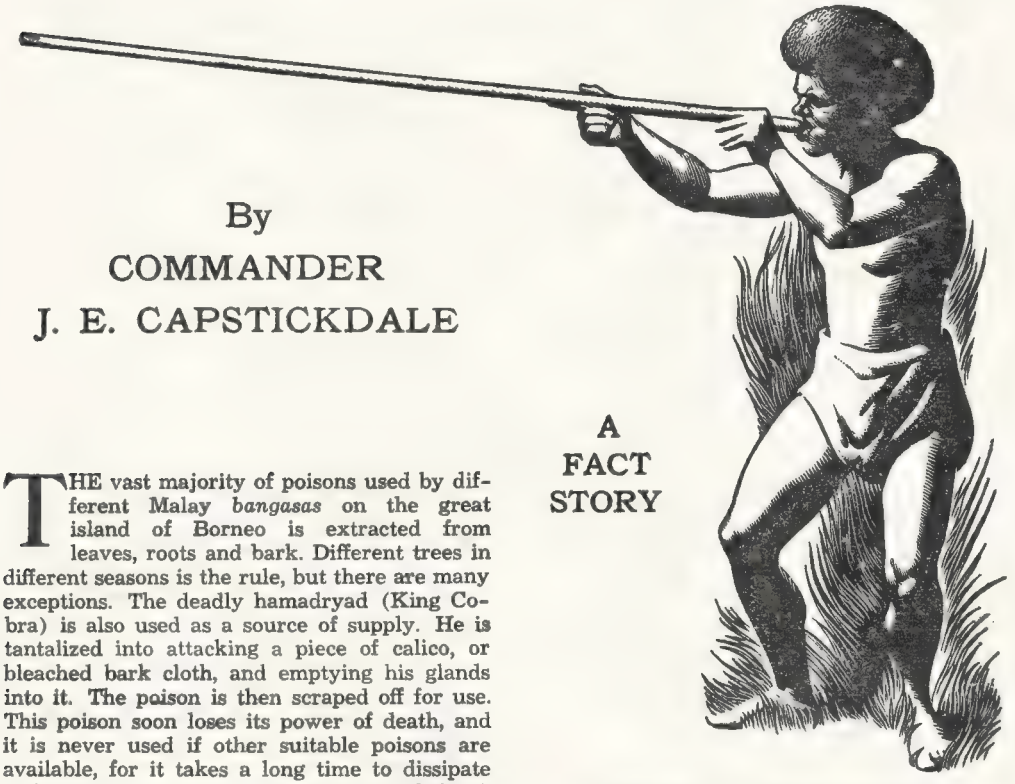
Thereupon, Farmery Lord Gosselyn, Baron of Puerto Cabello, took leave of his brother, and went to the west sitting room. Phyllis sat facing the doorway, and sprang up when he entered.

"Darling!" she cried. Then tears came to her eyes, as she noted his gaunt frame. Silently, she held out her arms to him.

Without a word, Farmery Lord Gosselyn, Baron of Puerto Cabello, owner of Egdell Manor in Devon, was home from the sea.

THE END

WHERE POISON RULES



By
COMMANDER
J. E. CAPSTICKDALE

A
FACT
STORY

DECORATION BY JOHN McCORMACK

THE vast majority of poisons used by different Malay *bangasas* on the great island of Borneo is extracted from leaves, roots and bark. Different trees in different seasons is the rule, but there are many exceptions. The deadly hamadryad (King Cobra) is also used as a source of supply. He is tantalized into attacking a piece of calico, or bleached bark cloth, and emptying his glands into it. The poison is then scraped off for use. This poison soon loses its power of death, and it is never used if other suitable poisons are available, for it takes a long time to dissipate and is apt to leave an unpleasant taste behind.

In hunting, the blowpipe, or sumpitan, is used almost exclusively in conjunction with the dart. This blowpipe is made of ironwood—tough yet light—and has a bore of about three-eighths of an inch that is so marvelously accurate that at first glance it seems to be the product of delicate machinery. Actually it is drilled by hand using a long, sharply pointed piece of iron, polished inside and out by dried leaves. The sumpitan is six or seven feet long and one and a half inches in diameter.

Through the sumpitan, the Dyak blows his poisoned arrows that are nine or ten inches long. These are slivers of bamboo fitted in a pith plug, which completely fills the bore. The arrow's very fine point is dipped into the poison. Often, when struck, the dart on penetrating the surface, leaves the plug outside and continues its journey some distance into the flesh, carrying with it its load of paralyzing, if not deadly poison.

Part of this poison is derived from nicotine in pipes, but deadliest of all is that extracted from the Upas tree, the Ipoh Batang, and this is lethal enough for anything—a few seconds sometimes and all is over. Some years ago, a ton of leaves from this tree was sent to Europe for extraction and analysis. This ton yielded little more than an ounce of poison, whereas a Malay would have produced almost weight for weight.

A Dyak heats the poison, then smears some of it onto a wooden plate with something that looks like a pestle. When the plate is covered with a thick layer of the pasty poisonous substance, he runs the arrow across the dish until it becomes coated with the mixture. Afterwards, the native makes a spiral cut in the arrowhead and once more runs it over the plate. This poison dish is never used for any other purpose, and is carefully kept away from utensils intended for cooking food.

Natives in Borneo fish their rivers by means of poison tree leaves. These are immersed in the stream some distance above a rattan barrage, and the stupefied fish are gathered up in baskets as the current brings them down. Birds in this dark land are poisoned by treated maize

until they can be caught easily by hand and caged for future disposal. All traces of poison leave the systems of both fish and birds in less than an hour, and they are then fit to eat. To a people able to obtain their food in this way, starvation has no terrors. Firearms are practically unknown in the interior of the country and quite unnecessary.

A hunting party may take out as many as a dozen different poisons. The one that will stupefy a wild boar may have no effect upon a running deer, while another calculated to put an elephant to sleep may be innocuous when injected by the blowpipe into the body of a passing bird. Whatever the need of the hour may be, the *bangasa,* or tribal wizard is able to produce the very substance required.

At a river camp of my own in North Borneo at the time of the Mohammedan festival of Hari Raya, a water buffalo had been purchased for the pièce de résistance of the "Makan Besar." It was of prodigious size and must have weighed nearly two tons, but then the feast was to be for more than eighty men, in addition to stray camp followers, who might turn up uninvited. Gate crashers are common in Malaya.

One of the camp boys, who happened to be the adopted son of the *bangasa* wizard, had sinned against one of the tenets of the faith, and had been forbidden by the local Imam to participate in the coming feast. His punishment consisted in being told off to look after the kerbau, or water buffalo, which was confined in the compound, and to swish the jungle flies off its thick yet exceedingly tender hide.

Instead of performing this duty, the boy watched his chance and disappeared into the forest, emerging with a handful of leaves and bark. These he pounded on a stone and later took to the fire. When he returned to the compound, he brought with him a leaf smeared with a dark paste. Some of this he placed on the kerbau's tongue. The beast took it and looked for more, but almost immediately it began to shake all over its great body. It took a few aimless head-down rushes, and then subsided with a crash against the stout posts of the compound. In less than thirty seconds it was on its back with stiff legs upflung in the air, dead.

OF THE many poisons known to the Malay, Dyak, Murut, Tidong, or whatever he may be, only a few are used to kill but many to disable in various ways. Cases of fatal poisoning of human beings are comparatively rare, practically non-existent if the venue is ruled by a government officer, or planter. Autopsies are revealing things, and there are very few substances even in jungleland that leave no trace in the body. In any case, there is seldom the need to kill. However, I do remember such a case in my own district.

At Tawau a murder had been committed—a case of the eternal triangle. The ensuing case was long and complicated, and the judicial commissioner came from the capital to try it. A dull-witted Tidong was the prosecution's chief witness, though his evidence at the preliminary hearing had proved very unsatisfactory. Probably the man had been intimidated.

When the Tidong had been brought into court from the jail where he was held in protective custody, absolutely nothing happened. A subtle paralyzing poison had been slipped into his morning meal right under the very nose of the police. He was deaf and dumb and in addition almost blind. The presence of a doctor, an Englishman of long experience in the country, who examined the witness, proved that he was not shamming. Yet the following day, the man was again perfectly normal.

This necessitated a fresh trial but with a change of venue. This time the case was tried at the capital. A Sikh police officer left Tawau with the witness under his charge. Suddenly, twenty-four hours after his departure, the witness died. A post-mortem was held, but revealed no trace of poison in the body. The case collapsed and the suspect had to be set free.

Only a very few of the Malay poisons have been analyzed and perhaps a couple isolated. There are still many that produce effects which defy explanation.

A truly amazing case took place at the Island of Simporna, port-of-call for coastal steamers and government post. Connected with a long jetty at nearly the shore end, was a large Chinese store and go-down built on stilts over the water. About sixty Chinese slept in this building. Usually Chinese are the lightest sleepers in the world, but once the Orang Laut (Men of the Sea) caught them napping.

The stilts of this rambling building were all connected up by ironwood and strong wire netting, and the enclosure put to use as a turtle park with only one entrance. About thirty reptiles weighing up to 400 pounds were housed there. One morning this turtle park was found empty. No one had heard anything during the night and the turtles could not have left of their own accord, but the syndicate owning them was out a thousand Straits dollars!

In the course of a few weeks the mystery was solved though the thieves were never caught. Three boatloads of Orang Laut came from an island twenty miles off in the Sulu Sea. They somehow broadcast a soporific poison, which not only put to sleep the Chinamen in the go-down, but also stupefied the reptiles in the turtle park! Thus the natives explained the mystery of their disappearance. Since then, there have been no live turtles parked under the jetty at Simporna!

ASK ADVENTURE

Information You Can't Get Elsewhere

YEW and your Taxus!

Query:—Is the yew wood that grows in this country the same as that out of which the old English archers made their bows? Also, is the stuff particularly valuable?

—D. R. Cummins,
221 Jay St.
Sacramento 14, Calif.

Reply by Earl B. Powell:—There are at least eight or nine known varieties of yew, namely Taxus Baccata, which includes the Spanish, Italian, English and continental yews. In Ireland is another variety with a slight difference in leaf.

In Japan grows another variety, and in China the Taxus Sinensis while in Mexico grows still another variety, which I understand is also found in the Andes.

Then in the United States there are three varieties, to wit the Ground Yew which is a shrub, then comes the Taxus Floridana or Florida Yew, which strange to say grows only on one bank of a certain river in Florida. The wood of this is brown with a thin white sap wood. It does not exist in enough quantity to use commercially.

However, northward from around Monterey up through the northern counties of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, on up through Vancouver Island and into Southern Alaska grows the native American yew. This wood known as Taxus Brevifolia (shortleaf) is identical in color and structure with the European yew except that it has a shorter leaf.

To all intents and purposes it is equal or perhaps superior to the European variety, and a stave big enough to make a bow will cost you anywhere from $1 up to $25—and this is for a piece about 1½ inches square, by six feet long having heart wood and with the sap wood left on.

No, it is not particularly valuable but I have paid $10 and up for more than one stave, and considered it a good buy.

If you know where there is a lot of it, cut it now while the sap is down.

WINTER plugging for next summer's casting operations.

Query:—I enjoy making casting plugs during the winter and trying them out during the summer. All I make are rather crude, especially as to color, finish and accessories. Can you supply the following information?

1. A list of books on moulding with plastics; source of supply for materials.
2. Information on finishing plugs with lacquer and paint, including fish scale, frog, and other effects.
3. Sources of supply for small lots of triple and single hooks, spring wire, screw eyes and baffle plates or whatever they call those metal plates which set up resistance in the water, causing plugs to wiggle and dive. The tin ones I make aren't so good.
4. What are some of the best woods for plug material? Where can I get them?
5. Do you know of any publication covering the field of plug- and lure-making?

—Ray L. Sawyers
Box 126
Urich, Mo.

Reply by John Alden Knight:—1. There are not, so far as I know, any books on the moulding of plastics. In the first place, no two plastics handle quite the same. What would apply to Bakelite wouldn't be true of Duco. How much information the various companies would give you is something I can't say. Best write a couple of them and see. Write to Du Pont de Nemours Co., Wilmington, Del., and The Bakelite Corporation, New York City and see what they have to say about it.

2. The Du Pont Company can give you a lot of information on finishing plugs. I can give you some. The wooden shapes are first given a liberal bath in "primer"—a clear, penetrating coat which will act as a binder for your finishing coat. The usual method is to tumble the shapes until they are dry. Then the shapes are dipped (using a machine for the purpose, so that there will be even drainage and coverage) in the base coat, usually white or yellow. Then the plugs are decorated by hand, the operators using artist's air brushes and lacquer. The final finishing coat of clear lacquer is sprayed on, otherwise the trim colors may run. Fish-scale finish is done by hand. A piece of coarse netting (such as is used in curtain material) is wrapped around the plug, over the base coat, and the darker top coat is sprayed on with an air brush. Frog finish and multicolored spots are done with an air brush.

3. Hooks are a problem. During the war, the imports just about stopped and the

American companies were limited in production. Your best bet is to write the big tackle companies, such as South Bend, Shakespeare, Pflueger, Cook, Gateway, and so on. These people want hooks and, in all probability, have first call on any new supplies coming in. You might also try Bill DeWitt and Wright & McGill, two American manufacturers. All of these firms can be found in the ads of the outdoor magazines. The screws, plates, etc. (all of which come under the general head of fittings) are, I'm sorry to say, special jobs which are turned out by or for the tackle companies, made with dies which are really prohibitive in price unless you contemplate buying in lots of 100,000. Best depend on your local hardware store for these things. In making your own plates, don't use "tin." It's too light. Use sheet brass, fairly well tempered, and then have your plates nickel-plated when you have made up your winter's supply. In this way you will get a pretty workmanlike job of it.

4. The best wood for plugs is red cedar. This wood does not expand and crack the finish on a plug. You can usually find all you want at your local planing mill or lumber yard.

5. No, I don't know any publications which cover the field of plug- and lure-making. Plenty about flies, but not much about plugs.

If I can be of any additional help, let me know.

WILD yeast and sourdough—and nuts to army cooks!

Query:—Can you tell me, (a) how to prepare and use "sourdough" yeast, (b) how to keep yeast growing?

This query is an aftermath of experiences in Normandy during the war.

For the first couple of months we were eating the British "Compo" pack ration, which was good, but there was no fresh bread and the biscuits eventually made our mouths sore.

When we finally got a rest period, I demanded that the cooks produce doughnuts. It developed that they had no baking-powder or yeast, without which, no doughnuts, bread, pies, etc.

There were several miners and lumberjacks in the company, so I tried them. They were either honest, and said they had only used baking-powder, or claimed that for sourdough you needed sour milk and soda.

For a case of bully-beef I got a French baker to give us seven pounds of yeast and the use of the brick-kiln he called an oven. Next day we feasted.

But the day after that I was informed we had no more yeast. I was annoyed, as I had a vague idea that yeast kept on and on forever. The cooks, with all due military courtesy, said I was nuts.

It never paid to antagonize cooks, so the matter was dropped. But with your reply, I wish to take it up with certain restaurant proprietors of this city.

—Major A. V. Malone,
60A Wellesly St.,
Toronto, Ont., Canada.

Reply by Paul M. Fink:—It's glad I am to be able to give you the information requested in your most interesting letter, and only wish that I could have gotten it to you while in Normandy, for if you could have gotten hold of some soda your bread troubles would have been over.

There are about as many recipes for making sourdough bread as there are for biscuits, and every outdoor cook will swear that his is the best of all. They all use the same principle, that of using the spores of "wild yeast" present everywhere in the atmosphere to produce a fermentation that will act as a leavening agent. Here is one formula:

4 cups flour
2 teaspoons salt
3 tablespoons sugar

Mix in a bucket or other receptacle and stir in enough warm water to make a thick batter. Then set the vessel behind the stove, in the sun or some other warm place and let Nature take its course. If there is no warm place available a cool one will serve, provided it is above freezing, but the process takes longer.

In about 48 hours fermentation will be well under way and the mess will smell to high heaven. Don't let that worry you—the louder it smells the better it will work.

Stir into these "sourings" a tablespoon or two of melted fat, enough flour to make a smooth dough and one teaspoon of baking soda. Mix thoroughly, shape into small loaves and set in a warm place to rise. In an hour or so they should be doubled in size and ready to bake. This baking will take from 45 minutes to an hour, and in the process the rank smell will disappear.

Sugar is not essential in the original mix, but hastens the process, and improves the flavor. The shortening also can be omitted if not available. Generally the bread is made in loaves, but if one wishes, pancakes are easily made.

The night before beat flour and water into a smooth batter and to this add a cup of "sourings" and set aside to rise over night. In enough batter for two persons add a couple of tablespoons of sugar, one teaspoon of salt and half a teaspoon of soda, all dissolved in a little warm water. Mix well and fry in a well greased pan. These, like all cakes, are better fried in small sizes.

Sourdough is not a single-meal yeast, but can be kept going on and on. When starting to mix the loaf, leave a cupful of sourings in the bucket and add to them flour, salt and sugar in the original proportions, with water to a batter. As this already has a running start, it will be ready for use in twenty-four hours. If for any reason you should lose the sourings, it's no great trouble to start all over again.

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Send each question *direct* to the expert in charge of the section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. **Do Not** send questions to the magazine. Be definite; explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question. The magazine does not assume any responsibility. **No Reply** will be made to requests for partners, financial backing or employment.

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Notice: Many of our *Ask Adventure* experts are still engaged in government service of one kind or another. Some are on active duty in the Army or Navy, others serving in an executive or advisory capacity on various of the boards and offices which were set up to hasten the nation's war effort. Almost without exception these men consented to remain on our staff, carry on their work for the magazine if humanly possible, but with the understanding that for the duration such work was to be of secondary importance to their official duties. This was as it should be, and when you didn't receive answers to queries as promptly as we all wished, your patience was appreciated. Foreign mails are still slow and uncertain, many are still curtailed drastically, but now that the war is over we can hope for a more expanded, smoother functioning *Ask Adventure* service very soon. Bear with us and we'll continue to try to serve you as speedily as possible.

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Archery—EARL B. POWELL, care of *Adventure.*

Baseball—FREDERICK LIEB, care of *Adventure.*

Basketball—STANLEY CARHART, 99 Broad St., Matawan, N. J.

Big Game Hunting in North America: *Guides and equipment*—A. H. CARHART, c/o *Adventure.*

Boxing—COL. JEAN V. GROMBACH, care of *Adventure.*

Camping—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

Canoeing: *Paddling, sailing, cruising, regattas*—EDGAR S. PERKINS, 1325 So. Main St., Princeton, Ill.

Coins and Medals—WILLIAM L. CLARK, American Numismatic Society, Broadway at 156th, N. Y. C.

Dogs—FREEMAN LLOYD, care of *Adventure.*

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Fishing, Salt water: *Bottom fishing, surf casting; trolling; equipment and locations*—C. BLACKBURN MILLER, care of *Adventure.*

Fly and Bait Casting Tournament—"CHIEF" STANWOOD, East Sullivan, Maine.

Health-Building Activities. Hiking — DR. CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, care of *Adventure.*

Motor Boating—GERALD T. WHITE, Montville, N. J.

Motorcycling: *Regulations, mechanics, racing*—CHARLES M. DODGE, care of *Adventure.*

Mountain Climbing—THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 6520 Romaine St., Hollywood, Calif.

Old Songs—ROBERT WHITE, 913 W. 7th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Rifles, Pistols, Revolvers: *Foreign and American*—DONEGAN WIGGINS, 170 Liberty Rd., Salem, Oregon.

Shotguns, American and Foreign: Wing Shooting and Field Trials—ROY S. TINNEY, Chatham, New Jersey.

Small Boating: *Skiffs, outboard, small launch, river and lake cruising*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif.

Swimming—LOUIS DEB. HANDLEY, 115 West 11th St., N. Y., N. Y.

Swords, Spears, Pole Arms and Armor—MAJOR R. E. GARDNER, care of *Adventure.*

Track—JACKSON SCHOLZ, R. D. No. 1, Doylestown, Pa.

Woodcraft—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

Wrestling—MURL E. THRUSH, New York Athletic Club, 59th St. and 7th Ave., N. Y., N. Y.

Yachting—A. R. KNAUER, 6720 Jeffery Ave., Chicago, Ill.

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL SUBJECTS

Anthropology: *American, north of the Panama Canal, customs, dress, architecture; pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Los Angeles Museum, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

Entomology: *Insects and spiders; venomous and disease-carrying insects*—DR. S. W. FROST, 465 E. Foster Ave., State College, Penna.

Forestry, North American: *The U. S. Forestry Service, our national forests, conservation and use*—A. H. CARHART, c/o *Adventure.*

Forestry, Tropical: *Tropical forests and products*—WM. R. BARBOUR, care of U. S. Forest Service, Glenn Bldg., Atlanta, Ga.

Herpetology: *Reptiles and amphibians*—CLIFFORD H. POPE, care of *Adventure.*

Mining, Prospecting, and Precious Stones: *Anywhere in North America. Outfitting; any mineral, metallic or non-metallic*—VICTOR SHAW, care of *Adventure.*

Ornithology: *Birds; their habits and distribution*—DAVIS QUINN, 5 Minerva Pl., Bronx, N. Y.

Photography: *Outfitting, work in out-of-the way places; general information*—PAUL L. ANDERSON, 36 Washington St., East Orange, N. J.

Radio: *Telegraphy, telephony, history, receiver construction, portable sets*—DONALD MCNICOL, care of *Adventure.*

Railroads: *In the United States, Mexico and Canada*—R. T. NEWMAN, 701 N. Main St., Paris, Ill.

Sawmilling—HAPSBURG LIEBE, care of *Adventure.*

Sunken Treasure: *Treasure ships; deep-sea diving; salvage operations and equipment*—LIEUTENANT HARRY E. RIESENBERG, care of *Adventure.*

Taxidermy—EDWARD B. LANG, 156 Joralemon St., Belleville, N. J.

Wildcrafting and Trapping—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif.

MILITARY, NAVAL AND POLICE

Federal Investigation Activities: *Secret Service, etc.*—FRANCIS H. BENT, care of *Adventure.*

The Merchant Marine—GORDON MACALLISTER, care of *Adventure.*

Royal Canadian Mounted Police—ALBC CAVADAS, King Edward High School, Vancouver, B. C.

State Police—FRANCIS H. BENT, care of *Adventure.*

GEOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTS

Philippine Islands—BUCK CONNER, Conner Field, Quartzsite, Ariz.

★New Guinea—L. P. B. ARMIT, care of *Adventure.*

★New Zealand, Cook Island, Samoa—TOM L. MILLS, 27 Bowen St., Feilding, New Zealand.

★Australia and Tasmania—ALAN FOLEY, 243 Elizabeth St., Sydney, Australia.

★South Sea Islands—WILLIAM MCCREADIE, No. 1 Flat "Scarborough," 83 Sidney Rd., Manley N. S. W., Australia.

Madagascar—RALPH LINTON, Dept. of Anthropology, Columbia University, N. Y., N. Y.

Africa, Part 1 ★*Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Tunis, Algeria, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*—CAPT. H. W. EADES, 3808 West 26th Ave., Vancouver, B. C. **2** Abyssinia, Italian Somaliland, British Somali Coast Protectorate, Eritrea, Uganda, Tanganyika, Kenya—GORDON MACCREAGH, 2231 W. Harbor Drive, St. Petersburg, Florida. **3** *Tripoli, Sahara caravans* — CAPTAIN BEVERLY-GIDDINGS, care of *Adventure.* **4** *Bechuanaland, Southwest Africa, Angola, Belgian Congo, Egyptian Sudan and French West Africa*—MAJOR S. L. GLENISTER, care of *Adventure.* **5** ★*Cape Province, Orange Free State, Natal, Zululand, Transvaal, Rhodesia*—PETER FRANKLIN, Box 1491, Durban, Natal, So. Africa.

Asia, Part 1 ★*Siam, Malay States, Straits, Settlements, Java, Sumatra, Dutch East Indies, Ceylon*—V. B. WINDEL, care of *Adventure.* **4** *Persia, Arabia*—CAPTAIN BEVERLY-GIDDINGS, care of *Adventure.* **5** ★*Palestine*—CAPTAIN H. W. EADES, 3808 West 26th Ave., Vancouver, B. C.

Europe, Part 1—*Denmark, Germany, Scandinavia*—G. I. COLBRON, care of *Adventure.*

Central America—ROBERT SPIERS BENJAMIN, care of *Adventure.*

South America, Part 1 *Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile*—EDGAR YOUNG, care of *Adventure.*

★West Indies—JOHN B. LEFFINGWELL, Box 1333, Nueva Gerona, Isle of Pines, Cuba.

Iceland—G. I. COLBRON, care of *Adventure.*

Baffinland and Greenland—VICTOR SHAW, care of *Adventure.*

Labrador—WILMOT T. DEBELL, care of *Adventure.*

Mexico, Part 1 *Northern Border States*—J. W. WHITEAKER, 2903 San Gabriel St., Austin, Tex. **2** *Quintana Roo, Yucatan Campeche*—CAPTAIN W. RUSSELL SHEETS, care of *Adventure.*

Canada, Part 1 ★*Southeastern Quebec*—WILLIAM MACMILLAN, 89 Laurentide Ave., Quebec, Canada. **3** *Ottawa Valley and Southeastern Ontario*—HARRY M. MOORE, 579 Isabella, Pembroke Ont., Canada. **4** ★*Georgian Bay and Southern Ontario, National Parks Camping*—A. D. L. ROBINSON, 103 Wembly Rd. (Forest Hill), Toronto, Onto., Canada. **5** ★*Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta*—C. PLOWDEN, Plowden Bay, Howe Sound, B. C. **6** ★*Northern Saskatchewan; Indian life and language, hunting, trapping*—H. S. M. KEMP, 501—10th St., E., Prince Albert, Sask.

Alaska—THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 6520 Romaine St., Hollywood, Calif.

Western U. S., Part 1 *Pacific Coast States*—FRANK WINCH, care of *Adventure.* **3** *New Mexico; Indians, etc.*—H. F. ROBINSON, 459 Towner Ave., Albuquerque, N. M. **4** *Nevada, Montana and Northern Rockies*—FRED W. EGELSTON, Elks' Home, Elko, Nev. **5** *Idaho and environs*—R. T. NEWMAN, 701 N. Main St., Paris, Ill. **6** *Arizona, Utah*—C. C. ANDERSON, Holbrook Tribune-News, Holbrook, Arizona. **7** *Texas, Oklahoma*—J. W. WHITEAKER, 2903 San Gabriel St., Austin, Tex.

Middle Western U. S., Part 2 *Ohio River and Tributaries and Mississippi River*—GEO. A. ZERR, 31 Cannon St., Pittsburgh, 5, Penna. **3** *Lower Mississippi from St. Louis down, Louisiana swamps, St. Francis. Arkansas Bottom*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif.

Eastern U. S., Part 1 *Maine*—"CHIEF" STANWOOD, East Sullivan, Me. **2** *Vt., N. H., Conn., R. I., Mass.*—HOWARD R. VOIGHT, 40 Chapel St., Woodmont, Conn. **3** *Adirondacks, New York*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif. **5** *Ala., Tenn., Miss., N. C.; S. C., Fla., Ga.*—HAPSBURG LIEBE, care of *Adventure.* **6** *The Great Smokies and Appalachian Mountains south of Virginia*—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

(Continued from page 8)

dread disease of onchocercosis, though, at the time, I didn't know its name. A friend of mine in Mexico City remarked that he had recently read an article in a Sunday newspaper referring to a village in which all the inhabitants were blind.

Returning to Mexico in 1944, I tried to check on it. It took me three months to find someone who had heard of either the village or the disease. Since my Spanish is far from fluent, I passed the job of research on to an acquaintance who had lived south of the Border for some thirteen years.

With the aid of the Mexican Government's Department of Health, he came up with the details that made the writing of "Village of Darkness" possible.

The disease exists in two Mexican states, Chiapas and Oaxaca. In the former the victims are numbered at 25,000; in Oaxaca, at 7,000.

The small fly, known as simullium, was originally brought from Africa to Guatemala by the Negro slaves imported to the huge coffee plantations. Thence, it was carried across the Mexican Border by political refugees and immigrants.

The fly breeds on the fast flowing waters in Chiapas. These waters are so abundant in the infested areas that it has thus far proved impossible to exterminate the pest.

Until such time as medical science can wipe out the fly the only cure for the affected is mass movement into other regions. And this, as other governments have discovered, is difficult if not impossible to accomplish.

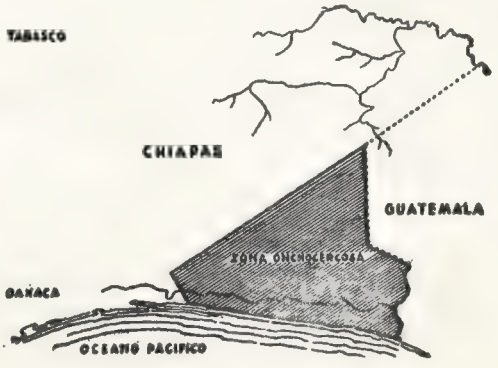
Blind or no, the Chamula Indian is fiercely possessive about his land. He was born there; he more than likely lost his sight there; and he will die there.

Mr. Champion also encloses a clipping of the article from the Mexican newspaper, *Excelsior,* which first called his attention to the subject. We reprint it below along with a picture of the deadly simullium fly and the map of the area where he reigns, a veritable king of darkness.

Mr. Franz Blom, the internationally renowned archaeologist, and Miss Gertrude Duby, the explorer, have just returned here in company with a small group of specialists in medical research with whom they made an adventurous and fatiguing 135-day horseback trip which took them throughout Chiapas and along the Pacific coast from Tonala to Tehuantepec. The purpose of this trip which, incidentally, was most successfully achieved, was to attempt to discover the path of entry into Mexico of the terrible disease known as onchocercosis which has blinded so many thousands of Mexico's rural inhabitants within the past fifty years.

The expedition's members satisfactorily established that the disease was originally brought into Mexico by the many innocent pilgrims from the State of Oaxaca who yearly made a pilgrimage to the Guatemalan Sanctuary known as the "Cristo Moreno de Esquipulas" which is located to the south of Lake Atitlan. Apparently this territory is a veritable breeding ground for the deadly mosquito whose sting and custom of depositing its larvae in the human upon whom it feeds brings blindness in its wake. This mosquito in all probability originally came to the Americas from Africa. Insofar as Chiapas is concerned, it has been established that the disease is probably brought there through the established custom of exchanging Mexican and Guatemalan laborers.

As a result of the facts established by the members of the expedition, doubtless much may be accomplished now by medical science in its efforts to arrest the spread of onchocercosis. As yet another result of the trip, Mr. Blom made many interesting archaeological discoveries while the "Instituto Indigenista Interamericano" which sponsored the expedition gained much additional valuable data for its files de-



voted to the Indian population of Southeastern Mexico.

JIM KJELGAARD, who gives us "Breed of the Blue Hen" on page 86 this month, adds the following bits of lore anent birds and men of the hack and main—

When I was a kid I had a lot of game chickens, sometimes as many as a hundred. They didn't belong to me, but were the property of a man who had more money than he knew what to do with, and he used to send the cocks to fights all over the country. Incidentally, cock-fighting goes on in all forty-eight states, but is illegal in all except two, New Mexico and Florida.

The chickens I had were all Arkansas Travellers, but they had deliberately been bred to resemble mongrels. This was achieved by breeding so that the cocks were all colors of the rainbow—everything from almost pure blue to pure white, or mixtures of black, white, red, and blue. Then, when five or six of them were taken to a fight, and it was seen that they did not even breed true to color, they were usually considered mongrels. This reacted to the benefit of their owner because lots of times he could get better odds on them. Those roosters could, literally, lick their weight in wildcats. Once when a house cat gone wild came into the yard with the intention of swiping a chick, a big rooster jumped on him, drove him into a hole, and walked up and down for an hour waiting for him to come out. Naturally, only one rooster could be permitted to run at one time. If two or more got together there was always a fight, and if they couldn't kill each other with dubbed spurs they'd fight until they couldn't stand up any more. It is said that a game cock will fight anything except a guinea hen—I don't know why. However, strictly from my own observations, I'd say that a game cock preferred to fight another cock. There's something about the sight of each other that just makes them mad.

I do not think that anybody could draw up a set of rules that would apply to cock-fighting in all parts of the country, but there're three main types of fights. A tournament is just what its name implies: several breeders bring their cocks together for a tournament of battle. In a main, two breeders will pit several cocks against each other. A hack fight is a free-for-all. Anybody can come with any rooster and fight whoever thinks he has a better one—this is the type of fight Al Carzot entered.

There is a definite procedure for cock-fighting, and though I've never attended one I think that this applies in tournaments such as the big one at Orlando, Florida. However, procedure varies in various parts of the country and there just aren't any Marquis of Queensbury rules which apply to cock-fighting. New procedure may be adopted on the spur of the moment—owners of opposing cocks will do whatever they think should be done. Two cocks may fight rounds, or just be tossed in by their handlers until one or the other is dead. Sometimes two cocks will kill, or almost kill, each other. When this happens they are placed breast to breast, and the one able to take the last peck is the official winner. Sometimes an owner who doesn't want his cock killed will forfeit his bets and stop the fight.

Betting is always spirited at any cock fight, and I know at least one man who rolled up a sizable fortune for himself doing nothing else. However, even most experienced men cannot tell which is the better cock—surprises always come in. A cock may be cut to pieces and lying on the floor apparently dead, then get up and in one last flash of strength kill his uninjured enemy. However, some cocks may prove themselves exceptional fighters, and, after they have won three or four victories, everybody who comes to a fight will try to bet on them. Plenty of people who never earned more than $150 a month in their entire lives fight cocks, and they'll bet a month's pay on a cock. However, the sky's the limit where the moneyed crowd is concerned. I don't dare say how much I've seen bet on a cock's last peck because I wouldn't be believed.

The fact that cock-fighting is against the law in so many states often leads to interesting complications. When the state police, or sheriff's men, start banging on the front door of the barn, or shed, or cellar, where the fight's being held, there's a grand rush for the back. However, the police aren't exactly fools, and when they know where a fight's being held they have a reception committee for the back-door commuters. Then the cocks are all killed and sent to charitable institutions, and the spectators all explain that they didn't go in there to see a cock fight at all, but to visit a guy named Joe. However, it's certain that fifty fights go on for every one that is pinched.

Personally I have no opinions about cock-fighting. It's been called a cruel and bloody pastime by some, by others the finest sport there is. As far as I'm concerned, anyone can think what he pleases and I'll never try to stop him.

MERLE CONSTINER, whose "A Cannon for Mr. Bibbs" gets primed on page 32, is not an author to turn a tale out overnight. A letter from him dated in mid-October, 1945 mentions that he's engaged in research on a story laid in Ohio in 1827 which he hopes he'll write some day and which—if, as, and when he does—he hopes we'll consent to read with a view to possible publication in *Adventure!* He rambles on to say—

In digging out the background I've run into some swell material. I delved back into the history of Hamilton, our county seat here, because I considered it a typical

Ohio town of the time: not far from the Ohio River, on a canal, and so forth. (In 1803 the county was paying a dollar per for wolf scalps, by 1825 big business was already getting a foothold. I learned, to my surprise, that there was a branch of the Tammany Society of New York here in Hamilton, Ohio, in 1812—known as "Wigwam No. 9," highly secretive, with messengers and runners sent all over the country, and known to have done much "mischief." The thing that actually impresses me most about this general period is the carnival of money-making, and big and little business enterprise that went on.)

What I started to say was that Butler County, a typical rural county, had, in 1810, seventy-four stills and a population well under two thousand. That makes about one still for every twenty-seven people, doesn't it? Of course some of the output was shipped by boat down to New Orleans—but not enough to cause a drought. Almost every other building was a tavern, or an inn, or a grocery, or a "house of entertainment," (which was a public house). One tavernkeeper in 1824 advertised that his liquors would be *fifty-percent* cheaper for cash. The customary drink for a man to buy over the bar was a half pint of whiskey which came to him in a standard little green bottle shaped something like a vinegar cruet.

I ran into some fine stuff about circuses with live animals being exhibited in fancy hotels, and exhibits of traveling waxworks, and about indented apprentices.

A little later than 1824, a good hotel, brick, with private rooms for ladies and gentlemen, would lodge you for the night, feed and quarter your horse, and give you supper for 56¼ cts. A meal alone would cost 18¾ cts. Lodging for the night 6½ cts.

(Too, I read a powerful eulogy about a once locally famous artist who, when broke, painted omnibuses and railroad coaches. His paintings put the local art lovers in quite a furore. His masterpiece was a brace of canvases painted in 1848, of The Greek Slave, front and rear views, each displaying "the matchless profile." These canvases later went to New York where they were sold for $1,000 apiece. If you happen to run into them, let me know. Remember, you can tell them by their matchless profile!)

Well, the months went by—the holidays came and went—and still no story. Just an occasional letter with a tidbit of century-old Ohio lore to keep us on tenter-hooks, curiosity whetted, and chops a-drool (an old Ohio expression). Finally Mr. Bibbs posted up to our door—and mighty pleased we were to see him—with the following final bit of Bibbsiana in tow—

> I went through literally hundreds of pages of old county histories laying in the background. It's a period I'm keen about anyway, and as a consequence I've rarely written a story that was as much pleasure to do. Wherever I could, I used the original 1830 terminology, a "band of music," for instance. The doctor's advice concerning the mortally wounded Captain Falconer seems laughable but it's directly from a contemporary medical book. The original was even stronger and funnier; it advises the patient not only to abstain from love, anger, and joy—but *especially, above all things,* from venery. When Mr. Ryecroft accuses the stage-driver of being "pregnant with fraud and deceit," he uses a phrase I found in an old advertisement of a merchant to his delinquent debtors. By the way, there was a special section of a county jail near here that was the debtors' prison, just like Merrie England. And Merrie New England. The boys in the Indian country certainly caught on to city ways.
>
> Hotels, in the Ohio country, in the early 1800's, were a strange mixture of European wines, ballroom manners, and backwoods' ruggedness. Many of the outlying establishments, shortly before Mr. Ryecroft's time, employed a regular house hunter who supplied the hostelry with backyard venison and bear. Privacy was a thing unheard of by the traveler of the period, the few taverns with facilities to offer it proudly advertised "accommodations for ladies!" In the best hostelries there was always a decanter on the dining room table but doorlocks on the guests rooms were something to write home about. There is an account of a woman traveler and her daughter who asked the innkeeper for a room with a lock and was given a hammer and some nails with the instructions to nail herself in until breakfast. Cardroom killings and highway crime seem to have enjoyed a heyday but, strangely enough, despite their mixed clientele, the hotels of the period lodged their guests safely, fed them, and mounted them the next morning safe and sound.
>
> It's a great thing going through old county histories of this section of the country. The compilers, generally anonymous, see national history only as it comes to their particular county. Which, of course, is the way history is made. You read that in the war of 1812 certain farmers, named, were recruited to form a company and march north to Canada; you find that to encourage marksmanship eight gills of whiskey was offered to the best shot, and four to the second best. (Very diplomatic, I think. Two prizes.) Many died on that hard march and their property was sold and the proceeds were turned over to their relatives; we find these prices: handkerchief 6½ cts., overalls 75 cts., hat $1.87½, belt and knife 12½ cts., seven twists tobacco 30 cts., hunting shirt $2. That's what the war of 1812 meant to the county-men and their families. County histories don't discuss the Treaty of Ghent.
>
> You read what happened at the county

seat when General Jackson won his election. You find that a barbecue was held along the riverbank, that a fatted ox was roasted whole, that whiskey was drunk in quantities, the celebrants cutting off with their personal knives that part of the ox that attracted them, you read that it rained heavily and that the celebrants had the time of their lives in the deep mud, and continued to celebrate. That was what General Jackson meant to this backwoods Ohio county.

That's the history for me—county history! And out of it came "Mr. Bibbs."

Thanks for the story, Merle. Thanks for the letters. And we've still got our eyes peeled for that pair of matchless profiles!

WE RECEIVED recently the following letter from a compatriot of Georges Surdez commenting on that author's *Camp-Fire* notation which accompanied his long novelette, "One for France and One for Me," in our January issue—

Sir:—

Georges Surdez, in an attempt to find a precedent for Marshal Pétain, sees a parallel between him and the old Helvetian chieftain, Divico.

He tells about a terrific mauling administered to the Helvetii whereupon Orgetorix sends Divico to treat with the Romans. The "fighting resumed" he says and "an additional two hundred thousand Helvetians bit the dust."

If Surdez has dug up some new material it certainly will prove interesting.

However, it does not seem that Orgetorix ever had any contact with the Romans, in battle or otherwise. He died by his own hand before all preparations for the trek were complete.

Divico was NOT a member of the delegation to the Romans. It was "two other fellers." (See *Die Schweiz in Römischer Zeit* by Stähelin, Basel 1927, p. 61.)

As for the "fighting being resumed and an additional two hundred thousand . . ." It went something like this:

The Helvetii got as far as Geneva where Caesar successfully prevented their passage. The Helvetii after some delay struck out northwestward across the Jura Mountains. Caesar cleverly used this delay to bring some badly needed reinforcements, then followed old Divico at what seems to be a respectful distance.

At Bibracte, Divico apparently turned savagely on Caesar and had it out then and there.

From here on you pays yer money and takes yer choice.

You can take Caesar's word for it in his *Commentaries* which was a political document written in the middle of a political campaign. His account of the encounter at Bibracte is to say the least not clear on some important points. If he won a brilliant victory, he gave a very poor report. And Caesar was a better writer than that.

But he would hardly make some statements which could be seized upon by his opponents to whom the campaign in Gaul was recent history.

G. Ferrero in his *Greatness and Decline of Rome* vol. 2, has some very interesting comments on the war with the Helvetii. Chances are Caesar got a hell of a shellacking at Bibracte but was clever enough to put matters on the diplomatic plane where old Divico was out of his element.

As for Pétain authoring the famous, *They shall not pass!* it probably isn't true. Some say it was Sarrail. I'd guess it was Nivelle.

To the Pétain followers I'd say he was one of the top tacticians of World War I, but not so good as a strategist. That is he was a swell Number 2 man. Give him a tough tactical problem. That's where he shone. And there was none tougher than when he assumed command at the time when the French army was ripe for mutiny after the Somme. Maybe he lived too long, I don't know. But you've got to hand him credit for his performance in 1917.

As for Surdez, I thoroughly enjoy his stories. In my estimation he has no match as a story teller in his chosen field, although he's a little spotty on history.

Sincerely,

—A. A. Domont
2094 Miner Ave.,
Muskegon, Mich.

Admittedly rusty on our Swiss history and even rustier on our Latin (we couldn't read a line of Julius Caesar today if we tried) we didn't even try to check M. Domont's sources but hastened his letter along to M. Surdez. Here's what the author of "One for France and One for Me" replied to his critic—

My dear Domont:

The editor of *Adventure* forwarded your letter of January 3, 1946 to me. It was a pleasant surprise to see your name, for it must be over twenty years since you first wrote me, a fine, long letter of compliments about my accuracy—if I remember correctly, and I am certain I do, you praised me for knowing that the tactical unit of the Swiss Army was the battalion and not the regiment. You wrote that you were astonished to discover that I even knew the nickname of the Jurassian Battalion, *le bataillon de la goutte,* or Booze Battalion. Since receiving your last communication to *Adventure,* I have been horribly conscious that I have owed you a letter for many years, fourteen, I think. Will it help you to find forgiveness for me if I explain that your letter reached me in Syria, in the midst of serious personal trouble? I postponed answering, then did the human, weak thing after a while, forgot to reply

because of my intense embarrassment at my long delay. I am happy to find that you are still alive and—truly, kicking, and I confess myself somewhat delighted to be able to demonstrate that you misread my *Camp-Fire* letter and jumped at conclusions.

You write: "He (that's me) tells about a terrific mauling administered to the Helvetii whereupon Orgetorix sends Diviko to treat with the Romans."

He (that's me again) tells no such thing—adjust your spectacles and read my letter to *Camp-Fire* carefully and you will find that I wrote: "The Helvetians, having suffered a terrific mauling at the hands of the Romans, their leader, Orgetorix, a suicide, had dug up Old Divico to head a delegation to the victors." As you behold clearly, I did not tell that Orgetorix had sent Divico, I even said that he was dead—I said that the *Helvetians* sent Divico. You admit in your letter that the Helvetians, or Helvetii if you prefer, sent a delegation. I am right so far?

You go on to state that Divico was NOT a member of the delegation sent to the Romans. I will not bother going to a library to check up with Stähelin. I reach for my favorite tome on Roman history—*Histoire de Jules César,* by Napoleon III, yep, the Emperor of the French. One of my professors in France told me to trust that book—he was against Napoleon III as a political figure, but he said the book was swell, because some good student had probably ghosted it and if an emperor could not hire good research men, who the devil could?

Turn to Page 66 of Volume II and you can read: "The Helvetians sent him (not me, Caesar) a deputation whose *CHIEF,* Old *DIVICO,* had commanded in the wars against Cassius. In a language filled with boastfulness (the French is: *Jactance,* the Latin probably: *Jactantia)* and menaces, Divico reminded Caesar of the humiliation formerly inflicted on Roman arms." Follow quotations of Caesar's answer, and Divico's parting cracks. I take it for granted that the author did not invent the interview, and he does describe a meeting of Caesar and Divico.

Thus, you write that Old Divico was not sent to Caesar according to your writer—and I say he was according to mine. According to another writer, Delbrück, the whole huge business of Bibracte is so much boloney, couldn't have happened because there was no room for so many men to move about. As a matter of fact, I quoted from memory in that *Camp-Fire* letter, I was jotting down a few notes about a story, did not seek controversy, had no reason to go into a lot of explanations and details, and based myself on generally known and accepted accounts. You quote as facts someone with a theory, and when all is said, theories remain just theories.

I did not even mention Bibracte, did I? According to the accepted versions, the Helvetii lost many at Bibracte and even more during the retreat, when Caesar turned the local "tribes" against the retreating Swiss. You declare, concerning Bibracte: "You pays yer money and takes yer choice." Oh, do you? Until Bibracte was fought, the Helvetii were on their way to the Gironde. After Bibracte, they started back for their homeland, which they had found hard to live in, which they had left desolate, they started back toward want and starvation, and the Romans followed on their heels. I think that if they had won they'd have carried on, and you and I would have been born in Bordeaux, which is unthinkable. You can quote tome after tome, accuse Caesar of lying, yet the Helvetii were on their way to the ocean, encountered the Romans—and went home.

I wrote that I had heard *Ils ne passeront pas* attributed to Pétain, I did not say that I was sure. *On les aura*—we'll take 'em—is certainly his, it's at the bottom of his order of the day for April 3rd, 1916—that's quoted from memory and I'll be damned if I'll check up. I wonder where you heard "They shall not pass" credited to Sarrail! And I am amazed that Nivelle is supposed as a possibility and would want proof. Nivelle was a man of great imagination, who conceived military things on a large scale, but I never suspected him of a gift for pat slogans! I have been told by a Legionnaire that the famous slogan originated with the Spanish members of the Legion in 1916, and *L'Illustration* printed a drawing of the Spanish volunteers cheering the slogan glass in hand. I have been told also that Colonel Driant originated it. And I was told several times that it was Pétain who had used it in speaking to Joffre on the telephone, at the height of the German attack.

I hope that you will grant that I am not "a little spotty on history," at least that I was not on this occasion. I used the classics instead of a national apologist. That said and cleared up, I am glad that you still enjoy my stories. I go to considerable trouble to get information and avoid mistakes.

I have a book coming out this spring, fiction—with the Jura Bernois and the French Jura as a background. You'll know the places, you know the people, despite disguises. The songs quoted will be familiar . . . We shall now close by singing in unison—come on, they must sing that in Alle, too: *"Que le matan n'tuè les Pe-pe-pe-* etc!"

Cordially,
—Georges Surdez

Far be it from us to attempt to act as moderator between a couple of guys who certainly ought to spot the holes in their own Swiss, hailing as they do from villages in the Jura Bernois only a scant couple of kilometers apart! Anyone else want to get in on the controversy?—K.S.W.

LOST TRAILS

NOTE: We offer this department to readers who wish to get in touch again with friends or acquaintances separated by years or chance. Give your own name and full address. Please notify *Adventure* immediately should you establish contact with the person you are seeking. Space permitting, each inquiry addressed to *Lost Trails* will be run in three consecutive issues. Requests by and concerning women are declined, as not considered effective in a magazine published for men. *Adventure* also will decline any notice that may not seem a sincere effort to recover an old friendship, or that may not seem suitable to the editors for any other reason. No charge is made for publication of notices.

Anyone knowing the whereabouts of Sidney A. Levinson, of Yonkers, New York, thought to have been discharged from the Army, please contact his buddy who served with him in Melbourne, Australia, in early 1942. Pvt. George Raybin, 12035917, 26 Military Government, Hq. and Hq. Company, APO 235, San Francisco, California.

Pfc. Robert Wallish, 39735959, 3292nd Sig. Base Maint. Co., APO 75, c/o Postmaster, San Francisco, California, would like to get in touch with Robert Limbach, now sailing with the Merchant Marine, whose home is somewhere in Chicago.

George Bates, last known to have been at an RFD address in Camden, Minnesota. He is a jack of all trades, but worked mostly in steel work. Any information will be appreciated by Robert L. Page, 3308 Alamaba Avenue, St. Louis Park, Minneapolis 16, Minn.

B. E. Tribble, R. Route 2, Rising Star, Texas, wants to hear from anyone who knows what happened to Sgt. James F. McDonald, 38094492, 3rd Auxiliary Surgical Group, APO 230, last heard from in February, 1943. He is especially interested in hearing from anyone who served with Sgt. McDonald in Africa.

I would like to hear from anyone knowing the address of W. F. (Billie) Benz, who used to ride rodeo in California some years ago. He was last heard of in Willits, California. C. R. Douglas, 628 Del Mar, Pasadena 5, California.

I would like to get in touch with anyone knowing the whereabouts of Joe Zimmer or any of his family. He formerly lived in Marion, Indiana, where he worked in a glass factory. M. Shulaw, 506 Dubois, Lawrenceville, Illinois.

Would like to hear from or about Leonard Owens last heard from in Indianapolis in 1944; George J. Snyder of Clarksburg, W. Va., last heard from at U.S.N. Receiving Station, Norfolk, Va., 1943; Lt. Robert Hairston 3rd, was in 15th Air Force, home in N. Carolina; Cpl. Pennington (nicknamed Penrod) 11th. Inf., Ft. Benj. Harrison in 1941; Leo Corns, lived in Indianapolis in 1944, now believed to be in Chicago; Sgt. Richard Thompson, 125th. Inf. Reg., Camp Maxey, Texas, 1944; Pvt. Douglas Williams or Wm. Douglas, home around Eldorado, Ill., last heard from in 11th. Inf. Reg., Ft. Benj. Harrison, 1941. Any information will be appreciated by G. E. Ziegler, care of Adventure —Lost Trails.

Anyone knowing the whereabouts of Carl Hatfield, born in western Kentucky, last heard of at Hardinsburg, Kentucky, in 1939, where he was in the taxi business, please communicate with his son, Pvt. James Ralph Hatfield, 35981592, 1-2 RR, AGFRD-2, Fort Ord, California.

Karl Miller, 1522 Mary Street, Marinette, Wisconsin, wishes to hear from anyone knowing the whereabouts of David Edwin (or Edward) Rivers, age 50, last known to be at 919 Bellameade Avenue, Evansville, Indiana.

Roy H. Edman, General Delivery, Riverside, California, would like to locate the following people: H. Goodwin, his son, Reece Goodwin, or his daughters, Rebecca, Lucinda, Minnie and Naomi Goodwin, or Ruth Doyle, last heard of in Wichita Falls, Texas, in 1921.

Francis E. Northrope, Monico, Wisconsin wishes information about his brother Melvin H. Northrope, last heard of driving a bus out of Hastings, Neb. He served four years in Canadian Army and is twenty-four years old, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, weighs 100-110 lbs., blue eyes, ruddy complexion, dark brown hair. His brother is too young to handle horses and needs help running the farm.

Anyone knowing the whereabouts of Wilfred E. Schmaultz, born and raised in Chicago, Ill., last heard of residing at 84 Jackson St., San Francisco, Calif., please notify M. H. House, Box M. c/o Atlantic Refining Co., Meeteetse, Wyoming. He probably shipped in the Merchant Marine in Oct. '44.

Anyone knowing the whereabouts of John Andrew Lannan, born at Summerville, P.E.I., last heard of at City Island, New York about fifteen years ago, was then engaged in ship building business and is believed to have moved to the State of Connecticut. Age about 64 years. Please communicate with his sister, Mrs. Hugh D. McClelland, St. Peter's Bay, Prince Edward Island.

Lt. Ptmn. J. L. March, V25183, Royal Canadian Navy, 20 St. Anne St., La Providence, P. Q., Canada, wants information about his father, Sydney Wilford March, whom he hasn't seen in 17 years. He was born in Portsmouth, England, came to North America in his youth, last heard of in Rochester, N. Y.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

Major Llewelyn Davies, just returned from Stateside furlough, listened to what was being said by the Japan Civil Control Authority commissioners at H. Q. and didn't like a word he heard. In fact he was learning fast what fellows meant when they talked about a castor oil assignment. The JCCA men who were pushing him around knew less about the game than he did and that annoyed him. Hadn't he been on his own here in Japan all through the war, disguised as Koropok, the bearded Ainu pariah? And now these guys were trying to tell him what ought to be done about "the Ainu problem." Davies had no intention of doing it if there was any way out—but is there ever a way out of a maze of brass? Davies thought there might be and in—

"THE SILKEN SCABBARD"

By SIDNEY HERSCHEL SMALL

—you'll learn what he did about it. He was all for reviving Nippon's devastated silk industry (hadn't he just come from home and listening to the clamor of the sick-for-hosiery female population?) but not to the point of letting the Jap use it as a means to disrupt Asia once again. Which was just what they were planning under the noses of the JCCA—until Davies became Koropok once more and began to untangle the silken skein that curtained the contemplated crime.

Also a smashing new Captain Carter novelette by William Du Bois that takes you once again to the Spanish-moss-hung fastnesses of the Floridas during the Seminole War . . . . "Beyond the Shoal" by William Breyfogle, a salty tale of the Caribbean when no Yankee crew was safe from the depredations of the British press-gangs . . . "A Mug at Charley's" by Giff Cheshire, another fine yarn of riverboating on the Columbia. . . . "The Private Debacle of Editor Wood" by Nard Jones, a hilarious tale of flood and flotsam and what a small-town newspaperman did by a damsite . . . . The next smashing instalment of "White Javelin" . . . . And the usual unusual assortment of fact stories, informative features, departments and verse that you'll find only in—

ON SALE APRIL 10th!

(Continued from page 85)

The "48" lap board had come up before my prayers for more speed bore fruit. Trip had backed off for another run and I could look down the line of sight, right over his shoulder and radiator cap, into the center of Joe's car. Then Lassie stuttered on the throttle!

Everything seemed to happen together. Eighteen closed the gap in a seven-league leap. Seven's rubber took hold at the same instant and I shut my eyes as I buried the grillework in Eighteen's tail!

It was over as fast as it started. The clang of metal skidded Trip sideways and threw his line of sight away from the center of Lassie. We headed for the crash wall, both sawing frantically at the wheel. Rolly was through the hole in an instant and, on our skid, Joe widened the gap like a P-38. I got front end control just before we hit the wall and Trip got Eighteen in hand about the same time.

Everybody follows the winner but I did see Elise kiss Joe enthusiastically as we made our pit stalls. Then the crowd flowed over him and in the crowd I could see Starett, a chap who owns an Indianapolis car.

SHE stood by Seven as I wearily hoisted myself out. Her eyes were shining. "That was fine, Jeff—terribly fine." She paused, then added, "Does Joe know?"

I shook my head. "You knew, of course . . ."

"When I checked motor numbers. When they failed to match with the car numbers I realized they were identical cars and you'd switched engines. You didn't tell him Seven's motor was in Lassie. Why?"

"He wouldn't have stood for it—even perhaps to the extent of not driving the event at all," I replied. "I knew he couldn't win without everything in his favor and Seven's engine was just that shade better. Besides," I added, "I don't want any part of the bricks myself so thought I'd better bait Joe's hook for that Indianapolis bid."

"Couldn't he recognize the difference?"

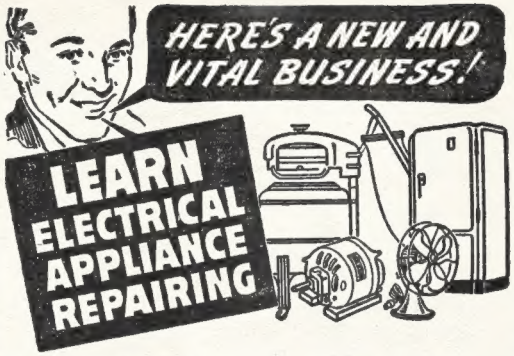
I wagged my head slowly. "I put in two fuel tanks. Ran him on a weak fuel mix for the time trials and match events. That's why I pulled up the seat before the main. To switch tanks."

* * * *

WHAT was the upshot of it? Oh, I guess you mean Elise—Elise Dwyer. You see, we were married two weeks ago. Yes. That's right.

I went to the library and looked up *Much Ado About Nothing*. You remember Act Two? *—He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man—* It was right after that that I remembered Joe had just started to shave!

THE END



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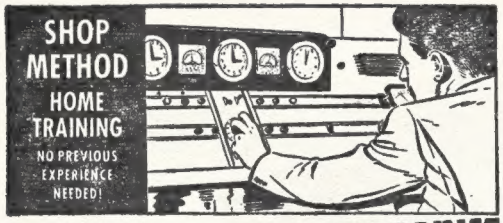

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(Continued from page 68)

room—alive. In the interval, you attempted to alter his books, didn't you? He died not yesterday but today. Did your underlings, Fye and Rodney, help you slay him? Why did you wait so long?"

Dinsmore said desperately, "He was really dying, I declare it! I had to 'kill' him to stop the draft, and yet I actually had to keep him alive. I was trying to persuade him to name his administrator on an undated paper. That would give me an opportunity to make adjustments.

"We arranged to move him from here this morning before the townspeople could assemble, before his presence would be discovered. There was little danger. Bagley and Dandridge had been told that last night he was being prepared for burial. Bagley and Dandridge knew of his personal opinion of the custom of viewing the corpse. Bagley and Dandridge could be depended upon to respect his final wishes.

"There's no crime in burying an empty, sealed coffin. You can't do anything about that. Nobody can do anything to us for that. Neither Fye nor I nor anyone else killed him. He—"

"He lay in the back room of Fye's shop, listening, dazed, to his funeral cannon, and martial band, wondering perhaps what Dandridge was celebrating. You buried him first, sir, and killed him afterwards. And we'll prove it, we'll prove poison, sir." Mr. Ryecroft's eyes were bleak.

Dinsmore paled. "How did, how did you ever—"

"I knew this was so when I saw his bedroom a moment ago. You stated that it had remained unchanged from the moment of his death. Last night when I talked to him the shades were drawn, for it was dusk. Now the shades are open. You spread them this morning. You substituted meaningless scrawls on the floor for his discarded drafts. Tonight Fye and Rodney placed his body in its exhumed coffin. You had previously circulated rumors of jewelry- and grave-robbers in preparation for just such an event."

Bagley Bibbs looked stunned. "Then *he* sent me the note that brought me here tonight!"

"Yes. For reasons best known to himself, he desired a secret moment alone with you. Perhaps you have been showing an unhealthy interest in your father's account books."

Bagley Bibbs' black eyebrows furrowed, the light glinted from the lenses of his steel-rimmed spectacles. "It's a pleasure and an honor to know you, sir. If there's any way, any way at all, in which I might repay this great service, permit me the favor of—"

Billy Hackett said promptly, "How about lendin' us some good ole—"

Mr. Ryecroft said sharply, "William!"

THE END

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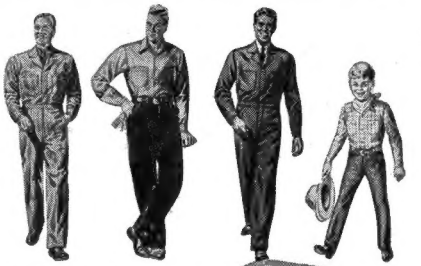

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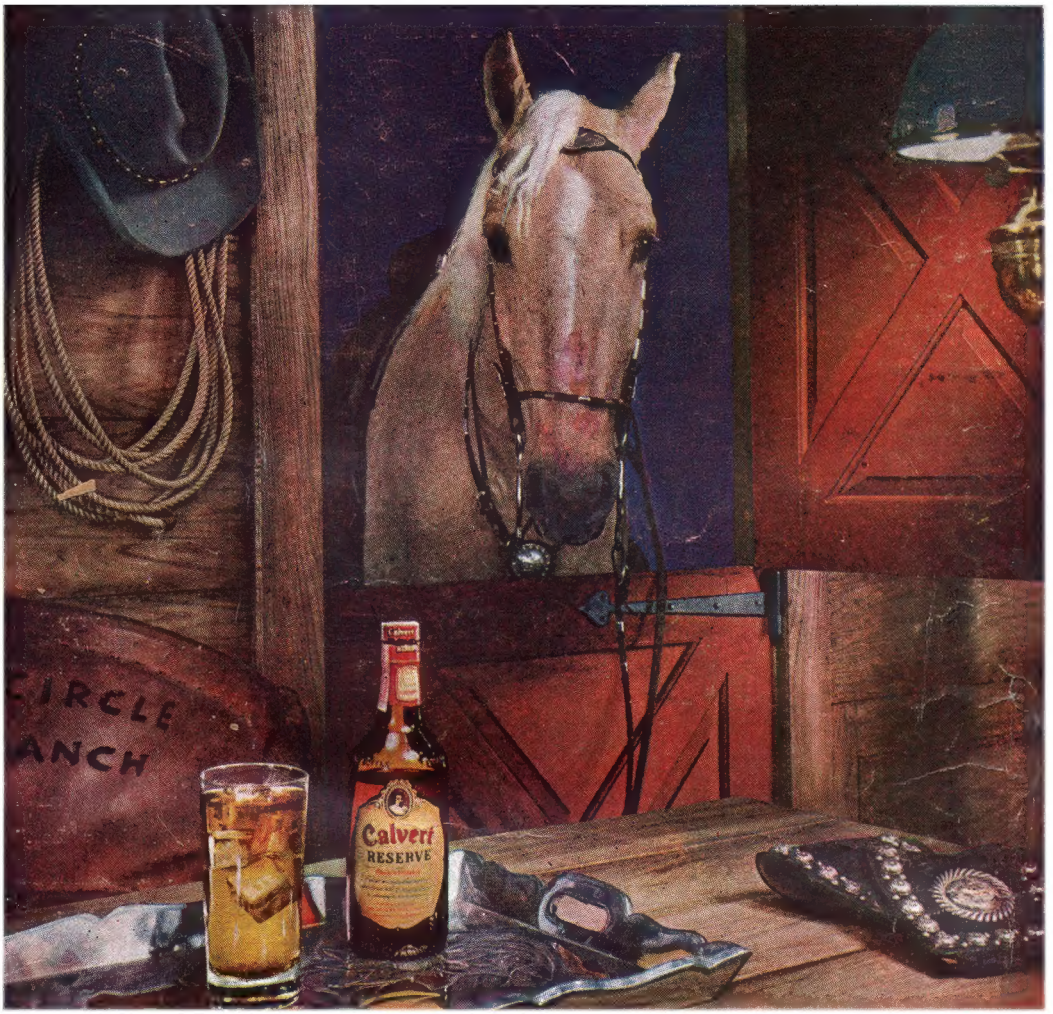

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